LOVE STORIES OF THE OLD WEST

ANC.

REAL WESTERN ROMANCES

JAN. 1955

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ALL NEW STORIES

SLADE REARDON'S GIRL
by FRANCIS FLICK

LADY VIGILANTE
by NORMAN DANIELS

A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

Amazing New Way TO A Slimmer Figure

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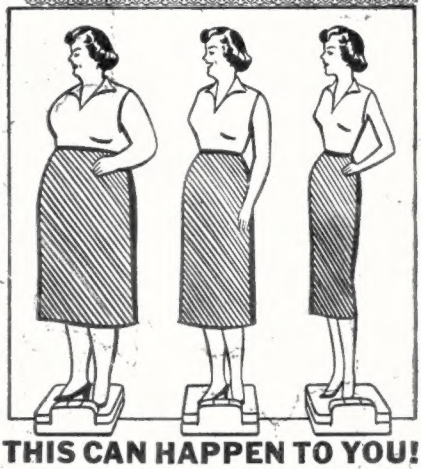

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REAL WESTERN ROMANCES

BRAND NEW LOVE STORIES OF THE OLD WEST

Volume 5 January, 1955 Number 1

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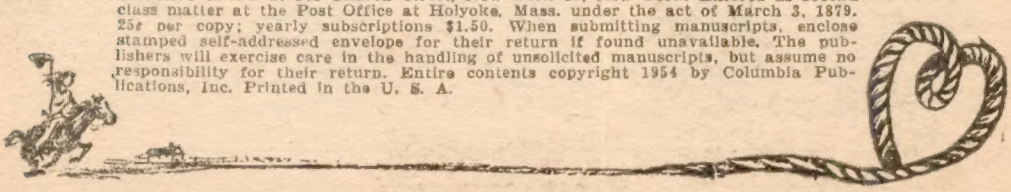

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How to Be a Success in RADIO-TELEVISION

SLADE REARDON'S GIRL

FEATURE NOVELETTE

by Francis Flick

Slade meant nothing to Dorcas — except that he was a challenge to a strong-willed girl!

DORCAS TAYLOR held her voluminous blue cambric skirt closer as she edged past barrels and piled-high boxes in the dim warehouse. The aisle was as narrow as the shaft of bright San Francisco sunshine slanting through the open door and the air was filled with commingling aromas of exotic spices and sandalwood, of tea and coffee and rum. She glanced over her shoulder flirtatiously, red curls peeking from under her blue plumed bonnet.

But Allen wasn't behind her. Her amazing green eyes narrowed before she shrugged. Obviously, her betrothed had stopped for further word with the men before joining her at the carriage.

Outside in the afternoon sunshine she looked across the deeply rutted street to the crowded dock and to the harbor as it bustled with scows and lighters scurrying to load and unload the clipper ships from China and Hawaii and New York. There was an exultant pride in her that three Taylor Line ships lay at anchor. Clippers that would soon sail for the Orient to return with their holds filled with ivory and spices and rich brocades.

Only they were her ships now, weren't they? And her eyes darkened with sadness.

To the right lay the *Dorcas Queen,* which had brought Aunt Matilda and Dorcas here yesterday after six tedious

stormy months around The Horn. Almost a year after her father's death, because Aunt Matilda had been adamant that Dorcas finish her schooling, in accordance with her father's wish, before coming out to marry Allen.

They'd wasted precious months. She didn't know why she hadn't persuaded her father to take her with him that raw cold day in New York. It had always been easy for her to get her way. Especially with her father. She amended that. With *all* men. Most of whom succumbed to her flaming beauty and gave unstintingly of themselves and their loyalty.

Now the brash young vigor of San Francisco caught at Dorcas. It held a challenge. Something in her leaped to meet it and she, too, wanted to help conquer the wild toughness of this exciting city that had mushroomed since gold had been discovered at Sutter's.

Not even Allen suspected her belief in herself and her own destiny. Like other men, he saw her long-lashed eyes and provocative smile and missed the hard-core. The will to be one of the strong in this world of 1850 where women were weak and dependent.

If only she'd had those extra two years here. She could have been with her father for that extra time and could have worked side by side with Allen when, because of her father's illness, he'd taken over as general manager of the Taylor Line and the big import-export company.

She smiled at Charlie, the dour coachman, and turned from the carriage for a less obstructed view of the *Dorcas Queen*. It would be nice if someone would smooth the rough planks of the sidewalk and fill in the miserable deep-holed street. Continual passage of men, animals and wagons had cut it to ribbons and Dorcas shuddered thinking what it would be like in the rainy season. The street to her father's mansion would be impassable. And she began to believe the tales of men and mules who'd been sucked into the mud and drowned.

Dorcas stood there slim and straight. Lovely, as the breeze from the Bay whipped her skirts around her. A proud girl, with her face lifted to the sun.

"Well, hello," a voice said, and she whirled to see a towering man.

There was something definitely breathtaking about the width of his shoulders and the way his black hair curled. Consciously, her own eyes shifted away from his dark gray ones. The impact of his physical magnetism was as devastating as it was unexpected. She stiffened. He needed a shave and his clothes were disreputable and caked with dirt. She was shocked that she had thought he was attractive enough to step the beat of her heart.

HIS EYES ran over her slender body, lingering at the soft curve of her breasts. "They said you were beautiful, Miss Taylor," he said softly and his grin was audacious. "But they lied. Not one of them said *this* beautiful."

Color whipped her cheeks. "I don't know you. I don't want to; so kindly go away," she ordered haughtily.

"Better get back to your carriage before you're insulted." He nodded toward a half dozen roistering sailors on the other side of the pock-marked street. "In their state they can't distinguish between you, Miss Taylor, and a beautiful dance hall gal." He chuckled at the flash in her green eyes. "Go back to your carriage, ma'am," he ordered and put his hand on her arm.

She jerked away.

He muttered something under his breath and sighed resignedly. One of the sailors stared at Dorcas, then staggered across and climbed up on the planked walk. He'd scarcely started toward her when the big black haired man took one step forward and knocked him back into the street. She

heard the shattering impact of his body as it crashed a deep hole.

The breath caught in her throat as she stared in horror at the man beside her. He was the type, she supposed, who'd take an unholy delight in a barroom brawl.

"You're a hoodlum!" she cried.

He looked startled before he laughed. "I expect so, ma'am. You know." He cocked his head to study her. "You've got a lot to learn out here on the Barbary Coast. We protect our women, ma'am, but we expect them to show just a little common sense. I guess you never will."

For the first and only time in her life, Dorcas wanted to flay a man with her fists. Such elemental emotion appalled her. It was humiliating that this impudent stranger could make her so furiously angry. It was even more humiliating when she caught the twinkle in his bold eyes. She lifted her chin and walked back toward her carriage, seething inside, her hands clenched.

He stood there, thumbs caught arrogantly in his wide belt. It was impossible to wait for Allen with this hoodlum staring and she almost ran back into the warehouse. She needed Allen's love and protection, she needed, suddenly, to lean against his strength.

Dorcas didn't bother to hold her skirts close around her as she hurried through the narrow aisle to the office and pushed open the door. Two burly red-faced men turned angrily.

"You're in the wrong place, lady," one said bruskely. "Get on out."

"Just one moment," she said imperiously. "This is my...."

Allen turned from the corner safe. "Dorcas, darling." He came to her side quickly. There was proud possession in his nice smile. "Gentlemen, this is Mr. Taylor's daughter."

One of the men shoved his tobacco to the other side of his jaw and hitched up his trousers. "Sorry, lady," he growled. "We'll check orders later, Mr. Potter. Come along, Bert."

Allen slipped his arm around her and pulled her closer to him. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting." His handsome face was contrite. "But I hadn't expected Spike and Bert, two of our strong-arm boys. Let me take you home now."

She thought of having to see the tall arrogant man again and it was actually abhorrent to her. And since she had to discuss the business with Allen soon, she might as well do it now.

"Since I'm here and you aren't busy, hadn't we better talk about the company?" Her eyes were steady on his. "Sooner or later we must go into it and I'd like to do it now and get it over."

He stared at her incredulously. "But I told you yesterday everything was fine. I told you not to worry your pretty head about things."

"I GUESS," she said slowly, "because it's mine I have to worry I really know a lot more about the business than you think." She smiled and wished Allen didn't look quite that shocked. "Father used to take me to the docks and warehouses in New York and he tried to teach me the excitement of trade."

"Isn't this just silly, darling?" Allen shoved an exasperated hand through his light chestnut hair. "I could talk from now until morning and you wouldn't understand a thing I said."

"Let's try. Don't you see, my father trusted me with his business, or he wouldn't have left it to me outright." She wanted terribly for Allen to understand the obligation she felt for that trust. "Just how do we stand financially, darling?" she asked gently. "So I'll know how much I can spend."

Allen's face tightened with anger. "I run this business, Dorcas, and I won't have interference. You're mar-

rying me and I won't have my wife poking into my business." He must have clearly read her determination because he finally drew in a sharp breath. "All right. I wanted to spare you. During the last months of your father's life he made bad investments and he lost his Midas touch. Before his crazy schemes he'd been able to crush any upstart clipper line who wanted to cut into our trade, that was because he was ruthless and had a huge gold reserve with Wells Fargo. There's no longer any reserve at all. I've done my best to hold it together for you."

"You've been wonderful," she said. After a minute she asked, "Are we broke, Allen?"

His eyes were stricken. "Practically. But if Banker Hurley will hold our mortgages a while longer I'll make it." He cleared his throat. "We're behind in the interest too."

She moved to the window and stood looking out across the Bay. There was nothing to say, nothing until the shock passed.

Without question Allen had done his best. And no man would suffer more than he by failure. Some men had the hard shrewd ruthlessness of her father, and some were sweeter and more gentle like Allen.

With a sense of guilt she suddenly thought about the black haired man who'd crashed the sailor into the hole in the street. She shut her eyes tight. It was horrible that he'd attracted her and shameful that she'd think about him now at this time.

She turned from the window. "Allen, what are the clippers carrying from here to New York?"

He looked annoyed and superior. "Whatever we can pick up. Mostly we sail half-filled."

"That's about the fastest way to go broke," she said wryly. "A year ago we could almost afford to send our ships back empty because when they returned here we were getting a pound of gold for a pound of nails." She bit her lip and her eyes were thoughtful. After a while she asked almost timidly, "Why don't we fill our holds with hides?"

Allen laughed. "That's ridiculous. It means our ships would have to load at Monterey and Santa Barbara and arrange contracts with the big cattle ranchers and it would be a nuisance. I never have thought it worth the bother. Look, Dorcas, suppose you just leave all this to me. And now," he smiled charmingly, "suppose I take you home."

She flirted with him then and gradually his wonderful good humor was restored. For this time she'd leave it to him. But if she'd thought San Francisco held a challenge before, it really held one now.

A wave of tenderness for Allen rushed through her and she took his hand. "It'll be all right," she promised. And it would be, because somehow, some way she'd make it so. Her father had left her his lifetime of work and he'd also left her a belief in herself and her future.

Courteously, Allen handed her into the carriage and she was glad that months in this rough land hadn't changed him. He still possessed the same gracious manners and consideration that he'd had that first night in New York.

FROM THE time her father had brought him to their red brick house in Washington Square, she'd loved Allen. He was the young assistant her father was taking West and she could even remember what he'd worn. A beautifully fitted gray-tailed coat and trousers, a darker gray stock with a black pearl and a tall beaver hat. Attractive and debonaire, he was the most charming man she'd ever met. It had been easy for Dorcas to give him all her heart and they'd been betrothed

in five weeks. But her father's ultimatum had been inflexible, they were to wait until Dorcas finished school... If only she'd fought it out with him then!

The coachman touched the matched team of grays with his whip and they moved forward. Dorcas tried not to worry about the business and was laughing at Allen's nonsense when she saw the black haired man in front of a warehouse. As they passed he smiled and his eyes met hers boldly for an instant. Allen looked straight ahead, but she knew he'd seen him.

After a while she asked casually, "Who's that big man?"

"Slade Reardon." There was cold anger in his voice. "A trouble-maker."

Silently she agreed that he was. Certainly the effect of Slade's physical impact on her had caused her trouble. She'd have to tell Allen about the encounter, then realized if she postponed the telling it might increase the importance of it to Allen. She shook her head and the dark blue plume danced a little. Keeping it light and casual, she told him and Allen's face reddened.

"Have nothing to do with Slade," he told her sternly. "He's no good and certainly your enemy." She was relieved that Allen disliked him too and her amazing green eyes brightened. "He's an ambitious upstart," he went on. "Slade signed on in Boston as assistant to the supercargo of a brig. He left the ship here and went to the gold fields and made a strike. Today, because of that and his gambling, he owns two clippers and thinks he can take our trade and markets. He thinks he can break the Taylor Line!" Allen's mouth twisted bitterly. "He can't. I'll break him just as your father did his competitors." Allen took her hand and held it tightly. "I'll see he doesn't annoy you."

"He won't," she said vehemently. She despised him. The hoodlum would never break the Taylor Line, not if she died stopping Slade Reardon.

2

THEY TURNED from the dock at Pacific and Davis Streets into Kearny and passed the wine and whiskey shops and mercantiles, passed a solid mass of dance halls, gambling and entertainment palaces and concert saloons. People overflowed the narrow planked sidewalks into the dusty chuck-holed streets. They stared at Dorcas and several men lifted their tall beaver hats and bowed. Allen smiled as his lifted his own hat.

"You'll be the talk of San Francisco by tonight, darling," he told her proudly.

She laughed. "Let's hope it will be good talk. Oh, Allen," she cried suddenly, "I'm going to love San Francisco."

"I doubt it, after the novelty wears off." His tone told her too plainly how little he found to like in young, bumptious Frisco.

After they passed the Opera Comique they climbed toward steep Nob Hill, the fashionable residential section overlooking San Francisco Bay. Here politicians, miners who'd struck it rich, merchants and bankers had built their homes, just as Dorcas' father had.

Allen smiled down into her eyes as he got out of the carriage in front of the big brown frame house and held his hand to help her out. Inside, the furnishings were lavish with teak from India, rugs from the Orient and brocade ball-fringed window draperies.

"Dorcas?" Aunt Matilda called.

"Coming," she answered, then whispered to Allen, "Don't let her know now that anything's wrong with the business."

He looked horrified at the mere sug-

gestion as they went into the enormous parlor with its great crystal chandeliers.

Her aunt was tall and angular and for as long as Dorcas could remember she'd worn a cap with a flurry of bows and ribbons indoors and out. If she knew it looked incongruous, she never let on.

"Sit down," she ordered and indicated chairs facing one of the horsehair sofas. Her eyes were gentle when she looked at Dorcas, as they always had been in the lifetime she'd devoted to her brother's daughter. "Mrs. Hurley, our next door neighbor, called and invited us to supper tonight. She and her husband were great friends of your father, Dorcas." She nodded and the ribbons and bows flipped around.

Allen was excited. "She's the social arbiter of this town, darling," he explained to Dorcas. "And her husband's the banker I mentioned. Samuel Hurley is one of the most powerful men here."

No one needed to remind Dorcas that Mr. Hurley held the mortgages on the business. It was charming of his wife to invite them so soon, because it was important that she meet him socially before she went to his bank to talk business. For a moment she flushed in embarrassment that she'd mentally taken over the negotiations, discounting Allen. Perhaps she could learn more about shipping hides to New York from Mr. Hurley, even knowing Allen disapproved.

"You need time to dress, Dorcas," Aunt Matilda said and she nodded absently when her aunt left the room.

Allen reached for her then, lifting her out of the chair. He drew her hungrily into his arms and his firm mouth pressed hard on hers with a sudden passionate urgency. She relaxed against him, giving herself to his kiss. Wanting him to obliterate everything from her thoughts but their love. Needing him. Abruptly, Allen moved away, his face pale.

"I'm sorry," he said huskily. "But I've waited so long, darling. Wanted you for so long. Marry me right now and don't ask me to wait any longer."

"Give me a little time," she begged, "to adjust to your Barbary Coast. I do want to be your wife. Very soon," she whispered and the light blazed in his eyes.

"A week," he said sternly. "Just one week more, my darling."

"A week," she promised.

She was thoughtful after Allen left to change for Mrs. Hurley's supper and she walked slowly up the broad stairs. She loved Allen madly when he was strong and dominate, and right now she needed the strength of his love to erase the remembrance of another man who was arrogant and mocking. A hoodlum! Her cheeks burned with the knowledge that she was thinking like a shameful hussy.

ALLEN AND Aunt Matilda were waiting in the parlor that evening when she came down, fully conscious of the picture she made in her green satin dress which almost exactly matched her eyes, her red curls tucked back sedately. Allen, she noticed with pride had never looked more attractive. Black broadcloth and a stiff shirt added to his dignity.

"You're beautiful," he said softly.

Aunt Matilda snorted. "It's going to be right hard on you, missy, when you meet a man who'll see through your wiles," she prophesied darkly. "Well, we're two minutes late." She made it sound like the crack of doom.

They walked through their garden to the Hurley's. A small, rather plump woman welcomed them warmly. Mrs. Hurley had a tendency to flutter and Dorcas might have dismissed her as unimportant if she hadn't caught the shrewdness in her eyes and made a quick re-evalutation. As a friend, this woman might be of inestimable value to Dorcas.

The other guests had been friends

of Dorcas' father and without any conscious effort she delighted them. Even Mr. Hurley smiled warmly through his stiff gray whiskers.

She was sipping sherry and listening to the ladies while she watched Allen as he chatted to the other men around the whiskey decanter, when Mrs. Hurley cried out in delight. She put down her glass and rushed across the room. Dorcas turned and froze.

Slade Reardon, dressed in beautifully tailored evening clothes, laughed as he lifted Mrs. Hurley in his arms and kissed her cheek resoundingly.

"You put me down this instant," she cried. "You wicked man."

"But you're my best girl," he protested as he put her down on her feet.

She slapped his arm with her ivory fan. "You have too many girls."

Every woman in the room perked up. Except Dorcas. They patted their hair and rearranged their moire and taffeta skirts. The men caught the contagion of Slade's laughter and seemed to suddenly become younger. All except Allen.

It was sickening!

"I'm hungry." Slade's eyes twinkled wickedly down at Mrs. Hurley. "Will you put on an extra plate? I didn't know you were entertaining."

"You did so. You just forgot," she chided. "Come meet the most beautiful girl who ever came to San Francisco."

Panic caught at Dorcas and she wished desperately that Allen were beside her. But he was standing a little apart from the other men, looking angrily into his glass.

Her eyes met Slade's mocking ones and she managed a faintly amused smile.

"And how do you like our crude, rough town now, Miss Taylor?" There was laughter in his voice. "Where only the strong can win. Are you strong as well as beautiful, Miss Taylor?"

"Strong enough, Mr. Reardon. And you," she dropped her voice, "are you as strong, when it isn't just a drunken sailor?"

"Yes, you can count on it." He'd dropped his voice too. "Let's test our strength some day soon, Miss Taylor." He bowed and made his way around the room, stopped for a minute with each lady. Even the ribbons and bows on Aunt Matilda's cap danced happily at something audacious he said.

The men crowded around Slade while he had a drink. Allen still stood apart and Slade nodded to him.

DORCAS found herself watching. It had been bad enough when she'd thought he was a waterfront hoodlum, but to learn that he was trying to grab the Taylor Line, and was a favorite here with the Hurley's was intolerable. It left her with a feeling of insecurity.

It didn't help her frame of mind either, when Slade came to her and held his arm. "Mrs. Hurley is allowing me to take you in to supper," he said.

There was nothing she could do but smile, knowing he was delighted with her quick flush of anger and Allen's discomfiture.

It was an elaborate supper at a beautifully appointed table. Dorcas had never seen more sparkling crystal and silver. Slade must have read her thoughts because his eyes twinkled. "The barbarians," he murmured.

She wished she could slap him. Every time she was near this man, he managed to produce violence in her. She only half listened to Slade's amusing stories of the mining camps, but she managed to smile when the others laughed. Once she caught Allen's eyes and was shocked by the cold hatred.

It was after supper that Mrs. Hurley led Dorcas to the back parlor to show her some of the beautiful gifts her father had given her.

"A clipper never sailed in that he didn't have presents delivered to me." Mrs. Hurley looked as pleased as a child at Christmas time. Dorcas made

a mental note to see that ships still brought Mrs. Hurley presents. She wanted to follow the custom of her father and she was sorry that Allen hadn't thought of it.

"He spoiled me with surprises," Mrs. Hurley laughed.

"And why shouldn't he?" Slade said behind them and Dorcas dropped a jade Buddah and he grinned as he picked it up. "You're our loveliest lady."

"I'm an old woman who should have more sense than to listen to the likes of you." Her eyes were warm. "Dorcas, this is a dangerous man. He flirts outrageously, takes love lightly and never means a word he says to any woman." She shook her finger at him. "Some day you'll fall in love, my handsome devil. And then you'll get your fickle no-good heart smashed. Be careful of him, Dorcas." She chuckled as she left them.

Idly, he picked up the Buddah and put it down again on the table. "I suppose you and Allen are marrying soon?" he asked casually.

"What difference could that possibly make to you?" she demanded coldly. His eyes met hers and there was the impact of that physical magnetism again. She could feel the beat of her heart in her throat.

He looked serious for a moment. "I'm not sure," he said. "But it's something I'll find out."

It was stupidly foolish to prolong this when she felt this way. Without meeting his eyes, Dorcas turned to walk out of the room.

Then it happened. The house jumped and the windows rattled. The Buddah danced on the table and then fell to the floor.

Dorcas was frightened. For a moment, she was dizzy as the walls shivered and a picture crashed. Slade's arm was steadying her.

"Don't be frightened," he said gently. "It's just an earthquake."

"Earthquake," she cried.

"That's all." He laughed. "You'll get used to these tremors."

HIS HANDS were hard on her bare shoulders as he turned her toward him, holding her close. His lips sought hers and she moved her head away, but inexorably his mouth found hers. She felt the racing fire spread through her body. She couldn't breathe and she never wanted to again. She clung to him.

He let her go and then she heard his quiet laughter. "You can't really love Allen and kiss me like that. He couldn't hold you for an hour if a man like me wanted you. A man who'd be your match." He read the cold fury in her eyes and laughed again. "Slap me if you want."

"I couldn't be bothered." Her voice was tight with fury. She almost ran away from him, but his words still followed.

"Yes, Dorcas, you'll be bothered. Someday."

She was trembling when she found Allen and she hoped he assumed it was because of the small earthquake. He put his hand on her arm and it felt warm and reassuring. Every nerve in her body cried out to get away from here—and Slade Reardon.

Almost immediately Slade made his apologies and left. It seemed to Dorcas that everyone in the room must hear her breath of relief.

"Probably," Allen said and his mouth twisted with bitterness, "Slade's got a date at the *Bella Union*."

"Most likely a date with Kate there," Mrs. Hurley shook her head.

Mr. Hurley teetered on his heels, "Slade's going far. I doubt if anything, or anyone can stop him any more than it stopped your father, Dorcas. You'd better watch him, Allen, or he'll carve into Dorcas' shipping to build himself an empire."

"Never," she cried. "He'll never get my ships."

"Keep quiet," Allen ordered sharply. "I'll take care of Slade, Mr. Hurley. Don't worry."

Mr. Hurley studied the ash of his cigar. "San Francisco," he said mildly, "is being built by men who aren't afraid."

"And by women too, sir." Dorcas smiled enchantingly.

They talked of other things and the warmth and friendliness was wonderful. Dorcas and Aunt Matilda were no longer strangers in a new world. But try as she would to prevent it, Slade kept forcing his way into her thought —as well as a girl named Kate.

She was even still thinking about him as they walked home through the garden. The moon slid from behind a cloud to make it a small corner of fairyland.

"I'd like to talk to you a minute, Dorcas," Allen said grimly and waited until Aunt Matilda said goodnight and went into the house.

"I saw you kissing Slade tonight," his voice grated. "I hurried to you because I thought the earthquake might frighten you. You were in his arms as I reached the back parlor."

"Then why didn't you do something?" she cried.

"And start trouble in Mr. Hurley's house. Are you crazy? When I'm trying to raise the money to pay the interest on the notes he holds? Slade's a conceited devil, but he still wouldn't have kissed you if you hadn't flirted with him. I saw you when he came in tonight. I saw you at dinner too." The anger was sharp in Allen. "But you're mine, Dorcas. And I swear to you that Slade nor any man will ever take you." He reached for her almost blindly, but she moved quickly.

"Goodnight," she said.

"Dorcas!" he called sharply. But she was inside the house.

It seemed hours that she stood at the door and listened to him pacing the garden path. Finally, she heard him curse softly and the garden gate swing with the violence of his slam.

It was a long time before she quit staring at the moonlight filtering through her window. So very many things had happened today. Meeting Slade Reardon, the shock of learning that the company was on the brink of financial ruin, the earthquake, Slade's hot searing kiss and a girl named Kate. Thought turned and twisted in her mind until finally she slept.

3

AFTER breakfast the next morning, Dorcas' restlessness increased. It seemed almost as if the walls were closing in. Her head was no more clear than it had been last night. She knew the things she had to do, but not quite how to do them. Then, like many a girl before her, Dorcas decided to go shopping.

She was feeling much better when she came out of the mercantile after buying material for new dresses and told Charlie they'd wait for their packages. Kearny Street was crowded and the people fascinated Dorcas as they ranged from filthy unshaven men from the gold fields to ladies in silken finery. The crowds roared when a wagon wheel got lost in a deep hole.

She heard Slade's laughter before she saw him. She felt cold and hot. He was pushing through the throng with a theatrically beautifully girl on his arm. Her hair was as jet as her eyes and she wore a garnet dress, rustling with ruffles and cut low and tight in the bodice. Her laughter was as joyous as his and Dorcas hated it, knowing instinctively this was Kate.

He passed the carriage and Dorcas let out the breath she'd been holding. Then Slade wheeled and came back with the girl. There was a devilish merriment in his eyes when he introduced Kate.

People slowed to watch the meeting and Charlie's back was disapproving. Somehow, without quite understanding it, Dorcas knew that it was she who was on trial. She smiled until her face ached with the effort.

"May I drive you wherever you're going, Kate?" she asked courteously.

Kate smiled too. "I don't think so. Tell Allen to bring you to the *Bella Union* some night, if you're not afraid. You might even bring him luck at the faro table where I deal."

"I'd love to come," Dorcas said. "You might even teach me faro so I can be lucky too."

Something almost like respect crept into Kate's black eyes. "I might at that. You're not what I expected, Miss Taylor. You really aren't. You're nicer. See you at the *Bella* tonight, Slade." She nodded as he patted his arm and moved into the crowd.

The clerk came out then and was loaded down with packages, which Slade took and carefully placed in the carriage. He stepped and sat beside her.

"Hadn't you better rush after Kate?" she asked.

"Don't tell me you'd be jealous!" He laughed delightedly. "Not you, Miss Taylor. Kate's one of the very best." He took Dorcas' hand and looked at her engagement ring for a long time. "That kiss didn't mean anything last night. So don't take it or me seriously. I haven't time for love. But when I ever do, Dorcas, it'll be with all the heart of me." His eyes held hers. "And the girl will have to love back with her heart too."

She fought back a furious anger. Finally she said evenly, "You needn't worry about me, Slade. I'll not bother you."

He flushed. "I didn't mean it that way. It's only that I have work to do and no one can stop me." He stepped out of the carriage. "You're the last girl, Dorcas, I could ever afford to love. Like me, you're damn dangerous." He grinned as he turned into the jostling crowd.

FOR A MOMENT, she stared after him, biting her lip. How arrogant could a man be?

"Charlie, please drive to Mr. Hurley's bank," she told the coachman and raised her parasol against the sun. Actually, she raised it because Slade might be watching her and she didn't want him to see her face.,

She'd thought she'd despised Slade before, but now she really knew what that meant. The carriage jogged along, in and out of chuck holes that rocked it like one of her clippers. She'd fix this smug man—she had to. It was vital to her future that he fall in love with her. Other men had. Easily. But with Slade this was her future as well as her pride. Because if he loved her enough he might not fight for her ships. He was a man who'd give completely of his heart.

Her plan would be easier if he weren't so attractive and she hadn't felt the impact of his magnetism. If he hadn't ignited a fire of interest in her when he kissed her last night.

Now, she had to talk business to Mr. Hurley about the extension of the mortgages he held and the unpaid interest. She'd ask his opinion about shipping hides East and if he approved she'd have to figure out how not to hurt Allen.

Mr. Hurley wasn't in, but one of his clerks gave her a message. If Dorcas called would she be kind enough to return tomorrow at ten? She would and thanked the clerk.

It was a good omen that he'd expected her. A good omen, too, that Mrs. Hurley had liked her. Dorcas had

been taught by her father never to discount the influence of men's wives.

Fortunately, Aunt Matilda was gone to have noon dinner at Mrs. Hurley's when Dorcas got home. Her aunt had sharp eyes and might suspect the trouble the Line was in. It would be easier to tell the truth after Dorcas made arrangements with Mr. Hurley.

She dressed that evening with particular care. She put on one of her loveliest dresses, a white brocade, cut low in the bodice and off the shoulders. Her hair was like flame and her eyes were as green as the emeralds she wore around her neck, the last gift of her father.

When Allen saw her, his eyes lighted. "Another party, darling?" he asked.

There wasn't any time to lose in her campaign against Slade. He'd be at the *Bella Union* tonight and neither he or Kate actually expected Dorcas to come. Certainly it could be to her advantage to do the unexpected. And she had to take every advantage.

"You're taking me to the *Bella Union* tonight, darling," she told Allen and watched his face redden.

"No," he said. "I'm not."

"But I told Kate I'd love to see it when she asked me today."

He stared at her. "I suppose Slade introduced you. It's a trick he'd find amusing. I know Kate. The *Bella's* a place men go. Lonely men. And a few adventuresome society ladies who go for a lark, so they can talk about it over tea. But not you Dorcas."

She laughed. "I'm an adventuresome lady, didn't you know? I must go there tonight so be sweet." She went to him and put a hand on his arm. "Please, darling." She studied him. "Or is there any reason why you don't want me to go sightseeing?"

"No. We'll go." His face was still flushed, but when she reached up to kiss him his arms folded around her. "I love you," he whispered. "I've been so lonely here. Can't you understand?"

"Oh, I do," she answered.

Charlie's back almost bristled when Allen directed him to the *Bella Union.* Aleln explained to her that this was one of San Francisco's "family theaters" and one of the most popular gambling palaces. Certainly for sixty years it remained the most popular ever operated on the Barbary Coast. There were beautiful pictured girls on its street dodgers and a promise of a program "Replete with Fun and Frolic." And it was the *Bella* who introduced the dramatic, terpsichorean and musical talent.

WHEN THEY entered, Dorcas and Allen passed through a large barroom and almost everyone spoke to Allen. Off to the side, she saw the gambling rooms and Slade was at a table, laughing as he bet. Allen led her to the "theater room" where sometimes they held shows. He was sorry that there wasn't one tonight, but the new troupe was coming in on Saturday. The room was sparsely filled.

No one had to tell Dorcas that Allen was a habitue. Not that she blamed him because he'd been a bachelor who'd waited patiently for his own girl to come.

Allen ordered champagne, explained he'd drink a toast to her one and only visit. He was stern about it and she felt a wave of tenderness for this charming man whom she'd marry.

Kate walked across the room to them, startlingly beautiful in a red sequined dress that hugged her slim figure.

"I didn't think you'd come," she told Dorcas and smiled. "I'm so glad you did." She smiled then at Allen as she put her hand familiarly on his arm. "I told Miss Taylor she might change your luck at my faro table."

His face flamed. "The little I ever gamble, luck doesn't matter."

"Of course not," Kate agreed.

"Of course not, darling." But even

as Dorcas repeated Kate's words, she was lying. She knew that Allen had been gambling here. It was in Kate's voice and in his. Well, a man could do foolish things if he were lonely enough for long enough. And she blamed herself for not fighting to come out here with Allen and her father.

"Back to work." Kate nodded. "Maybe I'll see you later, Miss Taylor."

"You're going to teach me how to play faro," Dorcas reminded her.

After Kate left, Allen stood there looking toward the entrance of the room. "I'm sorry," he apologized, "but I must see a man who might be here. It's business, darling."

"Run along," she said brightly.

Her heart was thumping. The sooner she could find Slade, the sooner she could begin her campaign on his heart. Unless she did, then the whole purpose of coming here was wasted. She waited until sure Allen must have found his man, then she followed him to the bar. It was then she caught a glimpse of Slade's tall figure going to the porch. As she followed him her heart pounded insanely.

At the far end, with only a dim reflection by one of the kerosene lamps, Dorcas saw the sparkle of a girl's dress catching the yellow light. No one had to tell her it was Kate's red sequins that was in Slade's arms. Almost blindly, Dorcas went back inside. And she swore that nothing on earth would stop her from making Slade love her enough to no longer fight for her line of beautiful ships.

She hurried into the "theater room" and stopped short. Slade grinned as he rose and held her chair. But he couldn't be here! Slade was out there on the porch kissing Kate.

Somehow, Dorcas managed a smile. "Hello," she said.

"Well," he said. "You came." His eyes danced down into hers as he drew back her chair. "The champagne's chilled enough." After he'd poured the wine he raised his glass. "Here's to your being sensible enough not to fight me. Here's to being reasonable about letting me take over the Taylor Line while you still can make a little money out of it."

She raised her own glass, her green eyes veiled. "Here's to your knowing you can never win it from me."

HE LAUGHED as he moved his chair closer to hers so that it obliterated the doorway. This was the crucial time in Dorcas' plans. If she failed to interest Slade in her sufficiently now, it would be too late. She smiled enchantingly up at him from under her long lashes.

"I'm afraid of you," he said. "Afraid as hell. I think you'd play games with me. You're beautiful enough to play them with any man if the stakes were high enough."

She laughed. "You really do make me sound dangerous. But," she touched his hand and hated the blood coursing through her when he covered it with his, "don't you like danger?" Then she saw Allen.

"Get out of here," he said angrily "and don't come near Dorcas again."

Slowly Slade rose and stood for a minute staring at Allen. "I guess you're right," he acknowledged. "Only, tell your girl not to flirt with me and try to make me fall in love with her."

Neither of them spoke after Slade left. Allen kicked a chair around and sat down, then he drank the champagne he poured.

Dorcas was furious that he'd interfered. Yet, only last night she'd been equally angry when he hadn't. Nothing made sense to her any more. She was confused. But definitely Allen had certainly interrupted her plans.

"I've told you," Allen said, "that you belong to me. And that Slade or

any other man will never take you away."

"I don't want any other man to. But suppose you listen." She drew in her breath and looked at Allen steadily. "I won't lose my ships, Allen. If I can make Slade love me, he might be willing to quit fighting for what doesn't belong to him. He might leave the Taylor Line alone." She smiled. "At best this is going to be very rugged and almost anything's fair."

Allen stared at her in amazement before he suddenly burst out laughing. "Why didn't you tell me? Lady-killer Slade might finally get his heart broken. Might finally come to heel. Darling, any man would love you if he thought he had a chance." He laughed again. "I've been trying to ruin Slade for months. And, now, while you do your part, I'll be doing mine."

Friends of Allen's began coming to their table then and were charming to her, though her mind was only half on their chatter. Some admitted that Allen had had a miserable run of luck at the gaming tables. It worried her because now she suspected that he'd gambled far too much—too much more than he personally could afford. But there'd be time to do something about it later. Right now, all that mattered was Slade.

It was later that Allen turned to her eagerly and she saw the red sequin on his coat, shining in the light. For an instant, she was too stunned to turn her eyes away from it. So, it had been Allen who'd had Kate in his arms on the porch. He who'd kissed her. Unreasoning anger and jealousy poured through Dorcas.

"We're getting married as soon as the Line is safe," she told him fiercely.

"You can't make it too soon. Let me take you home, darling."

Allen had never been more ardent. not even the night she'd promised to marry him. But all the time there was that red sequin on his coat.

4

AT TEN o'clock the next morning, Dorcas was in Mr. Hurley's office for her appointment. He was pleasant, but this was business and he'd neither ask or give quarter.

She sensed he'd appreciate directness and she came to the point, dismissing social amenities, though she allowed herself to look at him admiringly. "Will you tell me please the exact amount of interest my company owes, sir?" Her amazing green eyes held his. Though she knew approximately, she thought it best to ask.

He made a steeple of his fingers and told her the overwhelming sum. He watched her carefully. "Ummmm," he finally muttered. "My wife said someday you'd be the most important woman in San Francisco. She said you were smart as a whip and you'd stand this town on its ears before you're through."

"Thank you. When I get the interest paid will you extend my notes?"

Surprised, he said, "We'll talk about that then." His gray whiskers twitched. "Are you going to run your father's business, Dorcas, or is Allen?"

It was a question she hadn't expected and she was at a loss. But she knew that only the truth would do.

"I'm going to try to run it, Mr. Hurley, with your help. And Allen's. I don't want him hurt." She smiled. "I'm going to marry Allen and I want him a happy man." She told him then about her idea of shipping hides to New York and admitted that Allen didn't think it worth the trouble.

"That's a smart idea," Mr. Hurley admitted. "I didn't think a girl could see the great trade possibilities there."

She stood up. "I wouldn't have if

my father hadn't talked to me about them. Thank you."

"Dorcas, I'll expect my interest tomorrow by this time. I have a buyer for your notes," he added.

The color drained from her lovely face. "I can't show you contracts for hides by then, sir. It will take time to get them."

"We'll talk tomorrow *after* you pay the interest."

Somehow she got out of Mr. Hurley's office before panic hit her. Her throat was dry and she could feel the hadn't any idea what to do to raise the money by tomorrow. And she knew enough to realize that unless she did, she could expect nothing further from Mr. Hurley. She couldn't blame him because, after all, he was a banker. But there wasn't any place she could turn for the interest money.

Outside, she wasn't surprised when she met Slade coming into the bank. It could only be he who was buying up her notes. He'd told her, hadn't he?

"Dorcas," he said and his eyes lit up. "What business can you have with Mr. Hurley?" His tone was infuriating bantering.

"As if you don't know," she blazed. "My name's still Taylor. Remember, Mr. Reardon?"

"Yes," he said slowly. "I remember." He reached out and pulled her closer to him, his eyes burning into hers. "You can't do this. How can a man like me fight a girl?" Then he laughed mockingly. "And that's just what you want, isn't it?" His voice softened. "You've met your match in me, Dorcas. You need a man as strong as I to match your own strength. It's sad we met too late."

"I wish we'd never met at all," she cried and flew to her carriage.

She shut Slade Reardon out of her thoughts. She didn't ever want a man as strong as he, one with whom life would be a roaring battle. All she could think of now was how to raise the money for the interest payment tomorrow.

There wasn't anyone to whom she could turn. Panic froze through her again. Tomorrow—t o m o r r o w, the words beat through her mind. Then, she remembered. Her jewels!

THE CARRIAGE waited while she ran upstairs to her room and emptied her jewel box into her reticule. Most of the rubies, diamonds and emeralds had belonged to her mother, but there wasn't time now to think about their sentimental value. As she was going out of the house Aunt Matilda called her and they met at the entrance to the parlor.

"Here," she said brusquely and put her string of pearls in Dorcas' hands. "Now, go out there and lick them."

"Thank you, darling." Dorcas' voice trembled and she blinked back the tears that burned her eyes. "I won't ask how you knew."

Her aunt snorted. "Bad news travels." Just as she reached the front door her aunt called, "Allen will end up happy kinda leaning on you. And you'll end up happy having him."

"I know." Dorcas smiled and felt a lot better as she was driven back to the mercantile, since that was the only location she knew.

After she'd asked Charlie to wait, she walked in the raucous jostling crowd trying to find a money lender. Certainly Allen would know one, but she wanted this to be an accomplished fact before she told him.

She was looking for a sign on a store when she hear her name called and ate pushed through the crowd. Kate smiled.

"I think we better talk about Slade and Allen if you have a minute to spare. Let's go into the *Bella* and get coffee." When Dorcas hesitated Kate's smile twisted. "I won't take long and I owe your father a lot."

Curious, Dorcas went with her and they had coffee in the deserted "theater room."

"My father was a captain on one of

your father's clippers. He was killed in a brawl on the Malay coast." Kate's eyes misted as she stirred her coffee. "Your father generously provided for me and was my friend until he died. But I like the gaiety here and the excitement and I've been grateful that Allen got me this job. I make a good living dealing faro. Now, about the men." She smiled. "Are you really in love with Allen?"

"Of course I am, Kate. I'm going to marry him."

The girl put her hand on Dorcas'. "Do it soon," she urged. "He, well, he hates it out here. I guess he dreams of the East. And he's been lonely."

"I know." Suddenly it seemed foolish not to ask Kate where to sell her jewelry. She explained briefly about the drastic need for the money and Kate looked at her incredulously.

"So Allen's broken your company. If only he'd stop believing that tonight he'd be lucky at the tables." She held out her hand. "Give your jewelry to me. I'll get you full value and if you'll come here tonight at eleven I'll have the money for you. I like you. You have nerve."

"I can't be that trouble," Dorcas protested, but she finally turned over the jewelry. As she got up to leave she hesitated. "You're in love with Slade aren't you, Kate?" she asked.

Kate's face suddenly looked older. "Who isn't?" she asked simply. "But he's not for me and I'm not for him. I'm not quite strong enough." She laughed wryly. "Besides, he loves another girl."

"Oh?" Dorcas felt her heart sink and knew it was only because her plans for making him love her might fail. "I'll be here tonight at eleven. And thank you so very much, Kate."

"Your father was good to me," Kate said simply.

IN HER CARRIAGE, Dorcas managed to put Slade out of her mind and concentrate on her immediate problem. Suddenly she had an idea. She thought about it most of the way home and when they stopped she asked impulsively, "Charlie, I need your help." He turned around and looked pleased. "I want to know if there's anyone here in San Francisco to talk to about buying hides."

"I can drive you to an agent for that cargo and a fine friend of your father's." He smiled. "To tell you the truth, since you asked, your father made preliminary arrangements with Mr. Dykes just before he died. And your pa told me that a terrible lot of money was going to be made shipping hides to the east."

"Oh, wonderful!" She could have kissed old Charlie. The agent could enormously facilitate matters and it gave her courage to now her father had gone this far with the idea. She didn't censure Allen for not following through on it, because two people could both be wonderful and still have different viewpoints.

"I'll see the agent now. And I'll need you at about a quarter to eleven tonight, Charlie."

His face wrinkled in smiles as he flicked the team with his whip and drove toward the docks.

Dorcas hoped that Allen wouldn't see her driving to the water front. It would be difficult to explain without offending him. Later, when her plans were an accomplished fact, she could assuage his displeasure with a kiss. She smiled. Allen must always be head of the family and head of the shipping line. And if she managed him a little she would do it with such skill he'd never suspect. There were just two things she wanted—to save the Taylor Line and keep Allen happy.

The carriage stopped in front of a dingy, dirty-windowed little shack by the docks.

"You go right in, Miss Dorcas," Charlie encouraged. "Mr. Dykes is an all right man. You trust him."

With some hesitation she pushed

open the squeaky door. There seemed to be nothing inside but a confusion of papers and boxes with a roll top desk in one corner.

An old man swivelled around and peered at her. He had tufts of grizzled hair and bright penetrating blue eyes. His wrinkled face unexpectedly broke into a wide smile.

"You're Cyrus Taylor's daughter. I'd have known you anywhere." He jumped up and dusted off a chair. "Sit," he invited. "You're sure a lot prettier than your pa ever was." He laughed and then he told her how proud her father had been of her and how deep had been his love.

There were tears in Dorcas' eyes as she told Mr. Dykes about Slade's threat to take over her shipping line and the immediate and desperate need to make the clipper ships pay as they had under her father's management.

"You got any ideas?" He pulled the lobe of his ear while he watched her.

"Hides. Father used to talk to me about them in the East and he was convinced there were great sums to be made in them." Her eyes were steady on his. "Allen doesn't approve. But I have no choice now."

MR. DYKES nodded his head. "You're smart like your pa. He was on an overland trip down the coast to Monterey, Dorcas, to negotiate with some of the ranchos when he had an attack and had to be brought home." He drew a sheet of paper toward him and made some figures. "You'll need fifty thousand hides to load one ship." He glanced at her. "You figuring on sending Allen down to contract for the cargo?"

She thought about it. "No. I'll go myself with Aunt Matilda and an escort. It's safe, isn't it?"

"Safe enough if you have a big armed escort. I'll make the arrangements for you if you want."

"Oh, thank you." She let out a long breath.

"There're bands of highwaymen still roaming the country." He stared down at the desk for a moment. "I'll go along with you. Me, I like spunk. And I won't see you cheated." He laughed softly. "Though with your beauty the Spanish Dons probably will give you all the hides for free. This will take time, Dorcas, can you hold out until the shipping of hides pays?"

If Kate could sell her jewels for a big enough price there would be just enough money for her to hang on until her new cargo paid off.

"I think I can just make it." She rose in one graceful motion and held out her hand. "Thank you with all my heart. It's so good to find a friend of my father's."

"You'll go far. It's in your eye and the cut of your jaw. Before you're through you may be the most important woman in all San Francisco. See me day after tomorrow at ten in the morning."

"I shall be here at ten." She smiled at him again. "And you've been kinder than any girl deserves."

"Shucks." He looked embarrassed. She had almost reached the creaking door when he stopped her. "How do you like Slade? Aside from the fact he wants your Line."

It was unexpected and she stiffened. "I think," she said coldly, "I hate him more than any man I've ever known."

"Well, I expect you'll be seeing him around. He's after hides to fill his clippers too." He grinned at her flash of anger. "I wish your pa were still here, he'd be real interested in seeing you two clash. Yes, sir, he really would."

He was still chuckling when she closed the door. Slade meant nothing to her, except that she must use him. San Francisco was the challenge.

Dorcas hesitated as she started to step into her carriage. It was then she realized that the challenge was Slade.

At home, Aunt Matilda gave her a message from Allen that he was tied

up with important business tonight. She sighed in relief. It would make things easier. And to make them still better, Aunt Matilda was going over to Mrs. Hurley's.

IT WAS JUST eleven o'clock when Dorcas, in a hooded cloak, went to the *Bella Union*. It was a foggy night with the wet dampness making it a gray world. Dorcas felt conspicuous and self-conscious when she came into the *Bella* alone.

Then she saw Allen at a table with the two red-faced men she'd seen in the warehouse office. Who were they? Oh, yes, Spike and Bart. She rushed to Allen.

His firm mouth dropped in astonishment and he almost knocked over the chair getting to his feet. "Dorcas!" he cried and pulled her close to his side.

The two men got up in disgust. "All set then, boss," Spike said and stalked out with Bart at his heels.

Allen was still stammering a little in his surprise and Dorcas realized he was a little inebriated. "You, you shouldn't have come here, but you can explain later." He held her hand as he smile gleefully. "Tonight's going to fix our friend Slade. It's my first step toward saving the Taylor Line."

"Tell me." Excitement flushed her cheeks.

He grinned. "Slade's men are going to load one of his clippers tonight to sail with the tide. Spike and Bart have hired hoodlums who'll be standing by in boats. They'll sink any lighter bearing Slade Reardon's name tonight. The loss of the cargo will cripple him financially. It'll be a tremendous setback in his plans and we'll have a chance to get straight with Mr. Hurley. At least, Slade won't be able to take over that mortgage of ours."

For a minute Dorcas couldn't speak, her mouth felt like cotton. Her father had been a ruthless fighter, but he'd fought fairly. Trying to make Slade fall in love with her had seemed fair at the time because it was his strength against hers. But Allen's plan was a dirty way to fight. To hire toughs to send a man's cargo to the bottom of the Bay while it lay shrouded in the fog was shameful. There could be no pride in winning such a battle.

Allen laughed happily. "Then, darling, I'm going to shanghai his sailors." He laughed again.

"Some men will be killed tonight?" she asked and wet her dry lips.

"Certainly. You can't know what it means to lose most of a cargo. Slade's trying to expand too fast. Gambling, taking big chances."

"I think you should know about gambling, Allen," she said and her face was white. Before she could say anything more Kate came and there was something in her face that made Dorcas know Kate had wanted her to come here tonight to find this out. Kate had planned it this way and it had nothing to do with the jewelry.

"Hello," Kate said and while she smiled at Allen she surreptitiously handed Dorcas an envelope. She maneuvered so that she faced Dorcas. "Wells Fargo draft," her lips said silently and Dorcas thanked her and slipped it into her reticule.

"I'm going to win tonight," Allen told Kate. "Slade'll be broke by morning."

Dorcas thought about the laughter deep in Slade's eyes and his audacious grin. Of his strength and his joyous delight in life. Such a man should never start to defeat by a cowardly trick.

"Allen," she said coldly. "I won't win this way. I won't be ashamed all the rest of my life. Slade would never stoop to beating me like this."

"I run the Taylor Line," Allen shouted. "I run it as I damn please and you keep out."

"NO." DORCAS took off her ring and put it in his hand. "I'm sorry, Allen, but you're not running the

Line. I am. I don't mind too much that you broke the company with your gambling, but I won't tolerate a cowardly thing like this. Nor can I ever love a man who'd plan it." She swallowed. "I'm sorry. I honestly thought I loved you. I don't. Not enough."

He kicked back his chair as he got up. "You can t do this. I won't let you," his voice rose to a shout.

"I've done it, Allen," she said.

As she put on her cloak and adjusted its hood, she saw Kate put her arm around Allen's shoulders and saw the tenderness in her eyes. And knew that Allen would be all right, because Kate would take him as second best.

"Hurry to the Reardon warehouse," Dorcas told Charles and after he glanced at her face, he drove the team as fast as possible.

Dorcas closed her eyes. She knew now that she'd lost her heart to a man who was in love with another girl.

She'd fight for her ships, but it would be a fair fight.

The holes were deep in the waterfront street. The warehouses were all ominously dark. "Here's Mr. Reardon's," Charlie said.

She tumbled out of the carriage and hammered on the door, fists pounding. Suddenly out of the fog a hand grabbed her and she choked back a scream.

"Get me Slade Reardon," she whispered.

"You have him, Lady," that mocking voice said and she felt Slade's arms around her. "What's wrong?"

Words spilled out of her as she told him Allen's plans and she could feel him stiffen. "Lord," he said very softly. "My men could have been murdered."

She clutched at him. "Allen's toughs are only going to attack Reardon lighters. We'll send out your cargo on Taylor boats."

Things happened fast then as Slade shouted orders. Men darted around her and she was glad of the blessed protection of Slade's arm. Once he told her to give orders for the Taylor lighters and she did crisply.

"I'll be back, my sweet," Slade said finally. "Wait for me in your carriage. Charlie'll take care of you for me."

It was still later that she watched her lighters carry her enemy's cargo out to his clipper that would sail with the tide. It was dawn when Slade, dirty and mud-caked, got into the carriage and took her into his arms. His black hair curled and his smile was wonderful.

"You win," he said softly. "I couldn't even try to take your clippers now. I owe you too much." He took her hand, then suddenly his broad shoulders straightened and his eyes were as clear as the dawn. "The ring's gone," he spoke very quietly. "Does it mean what I've prayed in my heart?"

"I guess I fell in love with you, Slade," she whispered.

He laughed joyously. "We'll fight like hell and be the happiest people in all San Francisco. If you agree, we'll merge and you can run *our* shipping line with me. Hurley told me about your plan to ship hides to New York and we'll see Mr. Dykes in the morning."

"The day after tomorrow at ten," she said and smiled.

He whooped with laughter again. "Darlin', we'll never have a dull moment!"

"I know," she said. "And probably I'll never have much sense, but I'll try."

Then he kissed her and the fire of him flamed through her. She knew she was Slade Reardon's girl forever. There'd never be anything very gentle about their love, but there'd be glorious happiness.

Together, they'd meet the challenge of San Francisco. They'd go forward toward the sun.

★

LADY VIGILANTE

When Mark Jacobson came back to town as a Deputy Sheriff, it was almost too much for Paula!

by Norman Daniels

PAULA DIXON wore levis, a fringed buckskin shirt and big white Stetson. She was youthful and slim and with the darkness hiding light brown hair and a very lovely face; she looked like the leader of the dozen well armed men who rode single file behind her.

They picked their way down a pass to the lush, green valley where half a score of small houses had sprung up in the last year. The homes of sodbusters, usually a peaceable and quiet folk—but one of them had wrecked this reputation.

Paula held up her hand like a cavalry officer and the long line came to a stop. The man behind her rode up until his horse was close beside hers. Ed Nordley's face was grim and set. He was no more than twenty-four, but he looked older, like a man with heavy responsibilities. He had a thin mouth, not made for smiling, and iron grey eyes which Paula sometimes thought to be as cold as the metal they resembled in color.

Nordley said, "Well, Paula, you just give the word and we'll storm down there and teach that skunk something he won't forget in a hurry."

"All right," she said. "But no shooting—not even to scare him. I know he shot up the town himself and it wasn't the first time. He wounded Mrs. Holcomb, but not on purpose. Still, we can't have men like that around here and it's up to the Vigilantes to see that he leaves pronto."

"He'll hitch up his horses in ten minutes and in twelve he'll be on his way," Nordley promised. "Paula, the boys been saying what I said all along. You're so like your pa used to be, it's amazing."

"I try to be," she said. "Pa started

the Vigilantes around here, because our marshal wasn't able to take care of things. He helped rid this county of men who were dangerous and mean. He got shot in the back too, on one of these raids, but I'm carrying on for him the way I know he'd want me to."

"We all go along with that," Nordley said. "Like I promised, we get rid of this crazy sodbuster and nobody gets hurt none. Not unless he goes plumb loco. You all ready now?"

"Yes," she said. "I'll drop back here. You take charge, Ed."

Nordley turned his horse and rode back. Then he and his men swept past her, spreading out as they crossed the valley, until they had one of the cabins surrounded, Indian style. They rode their circle, tightening it gradually. Lamps were lighted inside the cabin. Folks came out of the other cabins, but quickly ducked back inside again when they realized the Vigilantes were riding.

After Nordley hailed him, a disreputable man in pants and undershirt, came out of the cabin with his hands in the air. Nordley dismounted and strode up to him. Paula couldn't hear what was said, but she saw the man, illuminated by the yellow light from his doorway, nod violently and hurry back inside. When he came out again, he was dressed. In five minutes he had hitched up a team, carried out what he could of his possessions and loaded them on the wagon. Then he climbed onto the seat and reached for the whip.

Nordley gave a wild whoop and pulled his sixgun. He fired into the air and the men with him shot up the silence for two or three minutes while the startled horse took off with the evicted sodbuster hanging on grimly.

Paula didn't wait for the others. As a rule, after one of these rides, the men hit town and drank quite a lot. However, it hadn't been one like that when her father first formed the Vigilantes. There'd been no drinking, no wild whooping or crazy shooting. The original Vigilantes had been a determined group who took their jobs seriously.

EVER SINCE the night Ed Nordley rode to her ranch and delivered the message that her father was dead, she'd done her level best to carry on just as he would have handled things if he were alive. It wasn't easy, keeping a tight rein on twenty odd cowhands, supervising everything, selling her cattle, organizing the drives and being a lovely girl at the same time. She'd done so well though, that most of the old hands had stopped wondering how long she'd last and now concerned themselves with how big her ranch would eventually become.

It was a lonely life. The big house seemed as empty as her heart. She knew Ed Nordley cared for her and several times she'd even tried to examine her own heart, but she found no love for Ed in it—nor for anyone else.

Once there'd been Mark Jackson, when he worked for her father, but Mark had left town for two years and while he was now back, he never came to see her. Mark was tall and lean, a born rider and level-headed and sober. Her father had liked him and that had been recommendation enough. After he quit his job, Paula wondered how she'd live without seeing him—even though he'd never so much as touched her hand or done anything more than smile at her.

Gradually he'd faded from her memory and she knew he'd been only a girlhood crush. It was odd though, how she thought of him as she rode along and how vividly she could see him in her mind's eye.

The ranch house and bunkhouse were both dark when she got back. She unsaddled her horse, turned him into the corral and walked slowly toward the house, hating to go inside. Lamplight only intensified the loneliness and tonight she didn't want to feel lonely.

The man who sat on her front porch came to his feet quickly as she moved toward the door. He startled her, but when he spoke, her heart did a flip-flop for there was no mistaking that soft voice.

He said, "I'm real sorry I scared you, ma'am. I been sitting here waiting. I'm Mark Jackson. I used to work for your pa, if you remember."

If I remember, she thought. If I could ever forget entirely. She came toward him with her hand outstretched and he took it hesitantly and shyly.

"Mark," she said, "I'm glad to see you. I'm sorry I wasn't home. . . ."

"So am I," he said slowly. "Riding with Vigilantes ain't a thing for a pretty girl to do."

She backed away from him. "How did you know I was riding? Why should it be your business anyway?"

"So happens it is my business. I'm a Deputy Sheriff, sent here from the County Seat to sort of look things over."

Paula sat down in one of the rockers. "A deputy," she said bitterly. "So that's why you came back. You took long enough, Mark. While there was neither law nor order around here, my father was murdered."

"Yep—I know that. It's the reason I asked to be sent. You got a bad situation here, Miss Paula. Folks in town keep electing old Bert Allison as marshal and he's just too danged soft-hearted to run this town right."

"We elect whom we wish," Paula said.

"Sure—and it's your right too. But the good folks elect him because they can't bear to turn him out and the bad folks elect him because they know he won't bother them much. So, you got little or no law. And that's where the Vigilantes begin."

"The Vigilantes are necessary," Paula said coldly. "My father thought so and so do I. Why didn't the County sheriff do something? Why did we have to start a Vigilance Committee to see that justice was done? My father was killed by men you and your kind should have driven out of this country long ago."

MARK LEANED against the porch railing. He talked softly and calmly. "When your pa started the Vigilantes, it was a fine thing. There were about a dozen men, all good and fair. Only the Vigilantes started growing too fast, but even so they weren't strong enough to stand up to the gunslingers, so they took in gunslingers too. That's what happened to all Vigilance Committees. They started fine, but they ended up being as bad—or worse—than the men they were supposed to punish."

"I don't believe that, Mark. Not the Vigilance Committe around here."

"They're as bad as any," he told her. "They like you leading them too, because folks think they must be all right. Sooner or later though, they'll show their hand and it'll be bloody. I dropped by to ask you to pull out."

"I won't," she said. "Who do you think you are, Mark Jackson?"

"I'm a lawman," he said. "That's why I'm asking. I don't want you riding with them wild ones when the trouble starts and it will, sure. Reckon I done the best I could. Good night, ma'am. You think it over. I know your pa would have."

Mark took off his hat again, gave a little formal bow and walked off the porch. He whistled once. A two-seater came from behind the bar. Paula peered into the moonlight drenched night. A girl was at the reins. It looked like Hope Benton. Of course it would be Hope. She was banker Benton's daughter, pampered and spoiled and she'd have her loop ready for any handsome man who came along.

Paula watched Mark get into the buggy and she didn't go inside until after even the sound of the hoofbeats had dwindled off into silence. Then she went into the house and lit a couple of lamps. She felt restless, nerv-

ous. Maybe she had worried too much about the recent efficiency of the Vigilance Committee. It had seemed to her that they were going a little too far at times, as if they rode for the sheer sport of it rather than on the business of cleaning up the community.

Now Mark had stated in words, what her thoughts had been. That there might be something wrong and if there was, she was a part of it. Then she remembered the killing of her father. The night he'd ridden at the head of the group, with Ed Nordley and the others siding him. They'd gone to drive out a pair of saddle bum outlaws who'd summarily taken over a range cabin and defied anyone to put them out. There'd been a battle royal that night. If these men rode for the sport of it, they'd hardly have risked their lives that way. Mark was either pig-headed because the Vigilantes were doing the work lawmen should have done—or he'd been misinformed.

She tried to forget him while she prepared for bed. She should have invited him in, where she could have seen him better. She was sure he hadn't changed much, but it would have been comforting to see for herself. Then she smiled and dozed and suddenly remembered that he'd driven out with Hope. Then she was wide awake and glad she hadn't asked him in. Though she hooted at the idea, she realized there was a tinge of jealousy there and it irritated her.

SHE THOUGHT about him all the next day. He was with her when she made and ate her solitary breakfast and dinner. When she gave orders to her foreman and talked to a buyer, it was Mark Jackson she faced. By sundown she was growing angry with herself and yet, she had to resist an impulse to ride to town and find him.

After the dinner dishes were done, she put on one of her best dresses and spent more time than usual arranging her hair. While she brushed it, she laughed at herself. She felt like a girl whose beau was coming calling—but Mark probably had no intentions of coming to see her and even if he had, it would hardly be under the banner of a beau.

She had her usual chores and did these. It was around midafternoon when Ed Nordley rode in from town. It was a stifling day so they sat on the porch while he talked.

Ed said, "We sure sent that sodbuster high-tailing it last night. He's maybe riding hard yet."

"I didn't like the shooting," she said frankly. "There were a lot of women and children in that little settlement and you scared the daylights out of them."

"Sodbusters?" he asked blithely. "Who cares? Anyway, we held a meeting last night, Paula. This was an important one, but I wouldn't agree to anything until after I talked to you."

"About another raid?" she asked.

"Yep—mighty important, this one. We're going after John Benton."

"The banker?" Paula asked with a frown. "Hope Benton's pa?"

"That's right. John's been riding high and mighty over folks for too long. Last month he foreclosed on eight small ranches. Eight of them, Paula. He turned them out and those folks lost everything."

"It was all legal," she argued.

"Sure, it was, but a man's got to use his heart and common sense besides using the law. John's been too tough and he's got to be taught folks deserve a chance."

"Just what are you aiming to do?" she asked.

"Well, some folks say John gives his debtors a fair chance, but nobody knows for certain. That is—they didn't until yesterday when one of John's clerks told us a mortgage is foreclosed the day after it falls due

and all John is after is property. By foreclosure he gets it cheap."

"That's still legal and the Vigilantes only ride when there's something illegal."

"Maybe so, Paula, but we think banker John ought to be taught a lesson about going slow. We aim to take him to his bank tonight and make him open the safe so we can have a look at his books and find out just who he's been forcing into bankruptcy. If we find some of those he let on should have had a week or two so they could raise the money, then we prove John is after property and is really a crook."

Paula was thinking that Hope Benton wouldn't hold her head quite so high if they did find her father was a tight-fisted, unscrupulous man. Paula rather liked the idea—so long as it wouldn't involve bloodshed. This was what Vigilantes were for. To do the things a regular law officer could not. If banker John Benton wrecked folks because he wanted their land, the whole town ought to know about it.

Paula nodded slowly. "He is not to be hurt or even handled roughly, Ed. I want that understood."

Nordley mopped his face and grinned. "He don't get ringy, there's no reason why the party should be rough. You come along and see that it ain't, if you like."

"I'll think about it, Ed. I wonder if we should though. Mark Jackson is in town."

"Mark Jackson? Oh—that hand who used to work for your pa. What's he got to do with it?"

"Mark is a deputy sent here by the sheriff's office. He says the Vigilance Committee should be broken up."

"NOW THAT'S real interesting," Ed mused. "Yep—real interesting. Proves we're doing good work and the sheriff's office is scared because we're showing them up. Folks must be beginning to talk. Wait'll we show 'em what sort of a land grabbing coyote Banker Benton's been."

"If Mark finds out, he may try to stop us," Paula said. "He talked that way."

"Reckon he won't," Nordley said. "I'll look him up and sort of have a little talk with him, Paula. Heck, we don't need no deputy here. We got us a fine marshal even if he is lazy and a mite scared when it comes to making an arrest. I'll take care of Mark Jackson and if he won't listen to the reason of words, I'll put it in a language he does savvy. No deputy is telling me what to do—not unless he's ready to back it up with bullets."

She didn't get up when Nordley left. There were a thousand conflicting ideas surging through her brain. It would be nice to see Hope humbled. And if her father was taking advantage of the settlers, then it was for the good of the town to expose him. No Vigilance Committee would do a more honorable or desirable thing than expose a man like Benton. But for Ed Nordley to look up Mark and perhaps shoot it out with him. . .that was what the Vigilantes were determined to prevent. Yet Ed Nordley, a Vigilante himself, seemed highly unconcerned about it and spoke of a killing as casually as the weather.

Paula knew the makeup of the Committee had changed shortly before her father's death, and even more so since then. Many of the men she rode with she didn't like or trust and sometimes she had a feeling they held back in their shooting and killing just because she was alone. Mark Jackson could be right. The day of the Vigilantes might be over. They'd made their point, did their bit to pacify the West and now it was up to the law. Her father had often said that day was soon at hand and he hoped he'd live to see it.

Paula jumped to her feet and yelled to one of the hands to get her

horse saddled quickly. She ran into the house to change into riding clothes and when she came out, the horse was ready. In a moment she was riding hard toward town. Mark Jackson had to be warned. She hoped she might overtake Ed Nordley, if he'd stopped along the way, but there were no signs of him. She rode up to the Commercial House, racked her horse and hurried inside. The clerk told her Mark Jackson had gone out an hour ago and he hadn't seen him since.

Paula went back to the main street and looked up and down. She saw the marshal's office and wondered if Mark could be in there. She walked rapidly toward it and on the way she had to pass Benton's bank. It was open, unusual for this time of day, and she could look through the windows and see Mark talking to Benton.

She almost forgot her mission. Probably he was talking about Hope Benton, or perhaps about ways and means of exterminating the Vigilantes. Why had he come back—if it had to be as a deputy assigned to work against what she believed in? Suddenly she realized that he was looking straight at her and with an expression of plain wonder on his face. He came out quickly and walked up to her with an eagerness she liked.

"Paula," he said, "I'm mighty glad to see you."

It came out impulsively. "Mark—Ed Nordley may be gunning for you."

"Is that so?" he mused. "Well now, I reckon Ed can find me any time he wants."

"You don't understand, Mark. Ed resents your coming here to break up the Vigilantes. He says it's none of your business and he intends to tell you so. If you don't take the hint, he'll back it up with a gun."

Mark said, "I reckon we'll soon know on account of Ed's heading this way now and he's being sided by three or four of his friends. I was you, I'd sort of step into the bank and stay there."

"I won't stand for any gun play," she said. "I'll stay with you. Ed won't do anything I forbid."

"Reckon you don't know Ed as well as I do," Mark said. "Suit yourself. By the way he walks, Ed's had a couple too many. Man who needs Dutch courage to face up to a deputy—well, he ain't a man to worry none about. I'll handle him."

NORDLEY spoke to the three men with him and they dropped back, but were ready for trouble. Ed smirked at Paula. "See you didn't waste no time riding in to warn this here fool deputy. I don't like that none, Paula. You got to be on somebody's side, not both sides at the same time."

"I told you there was to be no killing," Paula said. "The Vigilantes were organized to stop murders and shootings and even one of us can't break the rules."

Nordley shrugged and turned to Mark. "You heard what the lady said, Sheriff. No shooting. There won't be any, you pack your war bag and clear out."

Mark seemed completely relaxed, his arms were loose, his eyes were mild looking. "I'm here under orders," he said. "I'm staying."

"Well now, Sheriff, this here town is a right unhealthy place for folks who don't belong. We don't take no orders from the County...."

"You'll be taking mine," Mark said. "Your marshal is resigning and I'll be in charge. That means an end to the night riding...."

"And more'n likely the end of you," Nordley said and his hand grabbed for the gun, got it free of leather, started to bring it up and then decided against it. Mark's sixgun was pushed tight against Nordley's chest.

Mark said, "The sheriff I work under, thinks law guns should be as fast as outlaw guns and he makes us prac-

tice until we're near dead. Seems like it's all worthwhile too."

"Wait," Nordley said thickly. "This ain't the end of it."

"Almost," Mark said. "I'm taking over tomorrow and the minute I do, the first order I'lll post is that no more guns are allowed inside the town limits. The man who brings one in, gets buffaloed if he's lucky, shot if he ain't."

Paula moved beside Nordley. "Don't you think you're taking a little too much for granted, Sheriff Jackson? We make our own laws here."

"The State does too," Mark said. "And one of them is no more guns in town limits. Also no more night riding and that applies to you, Paula."

SHE TURNED and walked away. She heard Nordley and his trio of pals walk swiftly down the wooden sidewalk toward the nearest saloon. She hardly blamed them. Sheriff Mark Jackson could be the most exasperating man alive. She reached the front of the hotel where she'd left her horse. Someone suddenly thrust a long arm in front of her and, as she turned, curled that same arm around her. Mark Jackson held her to him for a second. His eyes were very serious. Then he bent his head and kissed her. Not roughly or hurriedly. It seemed like something he had meant to do for years and nobody was going to speed him up. Paula, it carried all the seething storms of a tornado. It startled her, stopped all powers of thinking right in their tracks, made her ache for more and sent her clinging to him as if she dreaded the moment he'd let go.

When he did, she was breathless. She heard him clearly enough, though the voice seemed far off. He was saying, "Maybe next time we meet, you'll shoot me, but I had to kiss you. A man can live with a dream only so long and then he has to do something about it."

"Mark," she said. "Oh, Mark...."

"I'm mighty busy, Paula, but pretty soon I won't be. Then I'll come riding up to your house proper and nice. But when you open the door, I'll take you just like I did now and I'll kiss you again—only I won't go away again. Stay clear of Nordley. He's no good. Stop leading that band of outlaws you call Vigilantes. They've been making a fool out of you. I reckon that's all. Good night, Paula."

She didn't answer because she couldn't. She saw him walk rapidly to the bank and go inside. Paula climbed into the saddle somehow and she rode in the direction of the bank and the wagon road out of town and back to her ranch.

She was opposite the bank when Mark came out—holding Hope Benton's arm. Paula's eyes opened wide. He saw her and waved. Hope smiled—and Paula slammed heels into the belly of her startled horse. She rode for the open land as fast as that horse could travel.

By nine o'clock she was raging mad at a man who could kiss her in public, ten seconds later warn her against doing what she believed to be right, and two minutes after that, go to another girl. It wouldn't have been so bad if he hadn't flaunted her in her face—or if Hope hadn't been a decidedly attractive girl. That's what Mark had done, however. If he was in love with her, as his kiss professed, then he should have stayed with her. Accompanied her back to the ranch so they could talk, perhaps iron out any differences connected with the Vigilantes. Instead, he'd gone straight to Hope. Apparently, he saw her as often as he could.

Paula threw her gloves and hat onto a chair and wished she hadn't been raised as quite so much a lady. She knew then why men got roaring drunk. She had to settle for strong coffee, but she drank a lot of that.

BY TEN o'clock her emotions were still high strung and she paced

the floor, making a determined decision that if Mark Jackson ever rode up to her ranch again, she'd shoot him on sight. And when she heard someone really riding up, she raced to a mirror and tried to pat out the slight puffiness under her eyes which she always got whenever she cried.

There was more than one man riding—there must have been half a dozen. Ed Nordley led them and they were members of the Vigilance Committee. Nordley swung out of his saddle and walked toward her. The others waited in silence.

Nordley said, "I ain't sure what the sheriff told you, Paula, but we're riding tonight."

"Tonight? Ed—it wasn't to be for a few days...."

"It'll be tonight and for a good reason. I think banker Benton suspects we're about to show him up and that's why the sheriff rode in to town and why the marshal resigned. But if we prove this and show up Benton as a crook and a thief—then folks ain't going to cotton to this new sheriff or the law sent in from the county instead of letting us elect our own man."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Just what we agreed on. Get Benton, make him take us to the bank, open the safe and show us his books. That way we'll have positive proof and then let's see that smart sheriff do anything about it. Why, folks would hang him if he butted in."

"You want me along, Ed?"

"Your pa would have led us. I'm thinking of him, Paula. We want you to lead us."

"Wait here," she said, and ran back into the house. She picked up her hat and gloves, ran out again and one of Nordley's men had a horse waiting for her. She moved to the head of the group, raised her hand and motioned them forward. Her horse was strong and fleet and they covered ground at a remarkable speed. Halfway to town, five more men joined them.

Paula wasn't thinking any more. She'd had enough of that and, like Ed Nordley, believed it was a time for action. This was what her father would have done. If Mark and the banker were in cahoots, then they should be exposed for the crooks they were. A quick study of the bank records would show one way or another...and Ed Nordley was so sure about things, there must be some foundation for his suspicions.

Right after they sighted the few remaining lights in town, Nordley spurred his horse to ride up beside her. He shouted against the wind.

"First we go to Benton's house. We do it real quiet. Best nobody gets woke up until we're sure."

"All right," Paula called back, "but no gun play or roughhouse."

"You're riding point," he said with a laugh, and dropped back to pass the word.

Fifteen minutes later, they had quietly surrounded Benton's house. Nordley and four men rapped on the door until Benton opened up. They promptly stuck a gun in his middle, roughed him off the porch and down the street. Paula and the others cantered in their wake and more and more Paula felt the grip of apprehension.

They reached the bank and Benton argued about opening the door. She saw Nordley cut Benton's face with the barrel of his sixgun and then cock the weapon and place the muzzle squarely between his eyes. Benton found the key and unlocked the door.

Six men remained on their horses and had drawn their guns. Someone was running toward the bank and all six were alert and ready, but they relaxed when they saw that it was Hope Benton. She ran straight to the bank and forced her way inside.

PAULA walked quickly into the bank also. Benton was in front of the

safe, engaged in opening it while Nordley kept a gun at the back of his neck. Hope flung herself at Nordley who grinned and pushed her away. Paula put an arm around Hope.

"Your pa won't be hurt," she said. "I promise."

"Paula," Nordley ordered, "take her into the back room and keep her quiet. This won't take long and we'll have the evidence we need to show up her pa and the sheriff."

"Come along," Paula said. "Everything will be all right."

Hope stared at Paula, then at Nordley and she offered no resistance when Paula led her to the door to the back room. Paula opened it, they passed through and she closed the door. As the latch clicked, Paula grabbed Hope by both shoulders and shook her hard.

"Listen to me, Hope. I got in this without knowing just what it was all about, but all of a sudden I know. There's a lot of cash in that safe, isn't there?"

"Yes....thousands...."

"I'm going to let you out the back. Run for the hotel and roust Mark out of bed. Tell him what's going on. Tell him he'll need men—a lot of men."

"But what about you?" Hope asked.

"Never mind. I can handle Nordley. —only hurry." She pulled back the latch and opened the back door a crack. She peered out. "Run for it, but stay off the street as long as you can so Nordley's men won't see you. They're around at the front."

"I'll tell Mark you sent me...." Hope said. "And thank you."

"Never mind that," Paula said. "You just take might good care of Mark."

She closed the door after Hope had gone through and then started an imaginary conversation. She kept it up, once pretending they were engaged in a scuffle. A few minutes crawled by. There was some shouting and angry words out front and the sound of several blows which were followed by moans.

Nordley said, "You blamed fool. I said not to hit him so hard. Now he's passed out. Get some water and wake him up. He'll open the safe this time or I'll break both his arms. Chuck—you have a look-see in back."

Paula put her back against the door and when Chuck tried to open it, she said, "Hurry it up. Hope is like a wildcat. I can't hold her all night."

"Just a few minutes more," a heavy male voice said. The door closed again. There were more moans, some threats and finally a few moments of silence. At least ten minutes had gone by. Paula was growing frantic. She went to the rear door and looked out—everything was quiet. While the town slept, its bank was being looted under the guise of a Vigilance Committee's work. Paula wondered how she could have been fooled for so long.

Then someone scraped fingernails along the back door and she rushed to it. Mark came in fast. With him were five men, all shot-gun armed and wearing side arms. Mark put his arms around her.

"Some of my boys are going to move in from the front and when them jaspers come piling out this way, we'll take them. Now you vamoose. I got things to tell you later and I want you able to hear what I say."

She stood on tiptoe, but her lips managed to brush his. "Be careful, Mark. For my sake and Hope's."

THEN SHE ran lightly out of the room and found refuge behind a barn. She saw exactly what happened. The posse started shooting and Nordley and his men tried to escape by the back way. They found themselves staring into the gaping muzzles of shotguns and promptly dropped the weapons they carried. One man made a wild break for it. He was carrying a black satchel and as he ran, he drew a gun from under his shirt and fired.

Mark stepped out of the back door. "Stop or you're a dead man, Nordley," he called.

Nordley fired twice. Mark cut loose with one slug. Nordley felt it hammer into his back and then he pitched forward. He tried to get up again and use his gun. He managed to get to one knee. Mark was walking slowly toward him, gun slanted down. Nordley had to use both hands to raise his heavy sixgun, but he got it level.

The foot that kicked it out of his hand was small, but accurately aimed and packed enough power so that he lost the gun entirely. Nordley looked up to see Paula's white face and then he fell over on his side and stayed there.

Mark came up to her. "Reckon I won't worry none about you any more. Not after the way you waltzed up to that sidewinder while he had iron in his fist."

"What did it matter?" she asked quietly. "I've been a fool and Nordley tricked me so badly, Mark."

Mark said, "Don't let that give you any misery because he sure fooled me too. I figured him and his boys were riding down to that bottom land to clean out the sodbusters there and it was just plain luck me and my posse got back just as Hope came running down the street looking for us."

"I was wrong, Mark," she said. "I admit it. Nordley was using me. I suppose he also used my pa."

"Reckon he did. He also killed him, Paula."

Her eyes opened wide. "Is that the truth?"

Mark nodded. "Heard it direct from some of the men who were in on the scheme. You see, your pa started the Vigilantes when there was need for them. But outlaws and gunfighters moved in and kind of took over. What the Vigilance Committee was started for, just disappeared and the riders were just a bunch of plain outlaws. They were after everything they could get and used the Vigilantes as an excuse for their moonlighting."

"But Nordley seemed so honest."

"Reckon he don't know what the word means, Paula. Your pa started wondering and keeping his eyes open. That's why they staged that fake raid one night and shot him. And that man they chased out of the bottom land when you rode with them—he was no sodbuster. Just one of their own men who was setting things up to look like the sodbusters were a mean crowd and ought to be shot up. Nordley wanted the land they were on."

"Anyway," Paula brushed back her mussed hair, "I saw the truth in time. Mark, I'm sorry for the way I acted. I'm glad you're going to stay in town and I hope you'll be very happy."

"I'm bound to be—if you keep on siding me."

She smiled. "I'll do all I can to help you and Hope too. She's got as much courage as I. The way she lit out of here to get help...."

"I know how much courage she's got seeing I been with her the last four or five days. Her pa asked me to sort of look out for her because he got word Nordley and his boys were up to something and Benton was afraid they might lay hands on Hope and hold her so he'd do what they demanded."

Paula said, "Mark—but I thought ...you were with her so much...."

"Heck," he said, "she don't cotton none to me any more'n I do to her. I asked to come back here for just one reason—because you were here and I was planning to meet you some way. I been in love with you ever since I worked for your pa, but a plain cow chouser, he don't go making love to the boss' daughter."

"But a Deputy Sheriff—he can make love to whomever he wishes," she said happily. "Take me home, Mark, and let's start catching up."

★

MOUNTAIN TRAP

Why did Jim Lord hate school teachers in those wild, lonely mountains? Or was it only Lynn whom he hated?

by Jeanne Williams

LYNN MATHER had taken the job because she was lonely at Spring Meadow. Everyone in the school district had seemed to be old or married except for the children she taught. When a letter came from a county superintendent of schools in the Big Bend Mountains asking her to teach in what he called "an isolated ranch school", Lynn had jumped at the chance.

Now the train was pulling into the county seat town of Sagar. Lynn told herself that whatever a ranch school was like, it had to be livelier than Spring Meadow where all anyone ever talked about was the price of eggs and butter. There might even be cowboys and cattle herds like those she had seen on her trip south.

The conductor got her suitcases and helped her off with the smile pretty nineteen year old girls usually get, even when they've been teaching for two years.

Breathlessly trying to straighten the little green hat that a west wind seemed determined to scoop off, Lynn thanked him, and turned to look at the town of Sagar. Her view of the town's long, straggling main street was immediately obstructed by a short broad man with a worried look on his kindly old face.

"Miss Mather?" He gave her hand a fervent shake. "I'm Warren Edwards, the County Superintendent. It's real fine to have you! Come on over to our house and get freshened up. My wife has a snack ready—and plenty of talk, too, I'll be bound!"

Before Lynn could do more than smile, he picked up her bags and trotted off toward a neat green-shuttered white house that sat back a little way from an ambitious town hall. Guiltily feeling that she ought to be carrying the luggage instead of the puffing small man, Lynn followed. Where was the ranch school she was supposed to teach at? Probably a long stretch from town.

As they went up the steps of the house, a tiny, bird-like woman darted out, paused a minute, and then took Lynn's hands in an instant welcome that made Lynn's eyes smart. Her parents had died a long time ago and she had grown used to being a stranger, but it got lonesome. Mrs. Edwards drew her inside.

"You come in and have a bite, honey! By the time you eat and have a bath, Jim Lord'll be here to drive you to the Split Arrow." Her face sobered. "That's where you're going to teach. The ranch is so far back in the mountains the kids can't get in to school." Lynn let herself be hustled through the parlor into the kitchen.

The red-checked tablecloth was fairly hidden under a load of crisp chicken, canned green beans, and wonderfully browned cherry pie. "Why, Mrs. Edwards!" Lynn burst out, "you shouldn't have—!"

"Pshaw!" hooted the older woman. "I like to do for people. Warren and me get lonesome with the children grown and gone. And call me Aunt Jane. Everyone does. I'll just sit and have a cup of coffee with you, honey."

BY THE TIME the meal was finished, Lynn had an Uncle Warren, too. He had come in and joined in the coffee-drinking. "If the folks at Split Arrow are half as nice as you," Lynn sighed happily, "I'll never be sorry I left Spring Meadow."

No one said anything. Taken aback, Lynn stared at the Edwards. Why were they eyeing her with such sudden gloom?"

"Uh—maybe I better explain about Split Arrow—I mean, about Jim Lord." Warren Edwards looked at his shoes, speaking reluctantly. "You see, he's got no use for formal schooling or lady teachers. Once he—"

A knock reverberated on the door. "Must be Jim now," fluttered Aunt Jane, and rushed to answer it.

Trying to act unconcerned, Lynn took a sip of coffee, but her gaze was riveted on the door. As it opened, a tall, lean man filled the opening for a minute before he came on in.

He jerked a gray hat off straight black hair, nodding hastily to Aunt Jane, as impatient as the prairie wind.

"Howdy, Aunt Jane. Howdy, Warren. The new teacher here yet? I had to quit right spang in the middle of dehorning cows to make this trip and I've got to get right back."

"You come right back and meet Miss Lynn Mather, Jim." Aunt Jane shooed him from the parlor into the kitchen. "Lynn, honey, this mannerless fella is Jim Lord. He's come to fetch you."

Setting down her coffee, Lynn smiled and nodded, but Jim scowled as he made a grudging half-bow. "I don't aim to sound fussy, Miss Mather, but are you sure you can teach? I mean, you—you don't look like a schoolmarm."

Lynn flushed. She'd been told before that she didn't seem old enough to be a teacher, but Jim Lord didn't mean it as a compliment. Who'd he think he was, talking like that the second he laid eyes on her? And he had cold gray eyes, too, without a bit of the warm interest Lynn was used to causing in young men. She got to her feet, gripping the end of the table.

"To ease your mind, Mr. Lord, I've been teaching two years. You're the first person to ever hint I don't know what I'm doing. Would you like me better if I had a long gray beard?" He had the grace to color under his dark tan. Shifting on his feet, he gave her a glance of reluctant respect.

"You called me, ma'am. I won't jump to any conclusions till we see how you make out with the kids."

"Oh, yes," broke in Aunt Jane, nervously changing the subject. "Where are the boys? Did they come in with you?"

Jim shook his head. "No. Miss Madge dropped by with some stuff

and she wanted to stay an' keep an eye on 'em." He grinned with a pride that made him seem very young. "She says she loves to be around the boys, they're such lively honest-to-goodness kids."

What other kind are there? Lynn wondered. From the way Jim talked, the children must be his. In spite of his rudeness, Lynn was disappointed that he was married. She'd hoped he was single so she could teach *him* a few lessons, such as not to scowl at people.

"Madge Owens takes a right smart interest in her neighbors," said Aunt Jane, sort of snappishly. "Well, have some pie and coffee, Jim, whilst Lynn takes her bath and gets ready to go."

"Holy cats!" Jim was frowning like a storm read to cut loose. "I tell you, I got them cows to dehorn, want to get at it early in the morning! It'll be midnight before we make the Split Arrow if I have to fool around here much longer!"

LYNN ACHED for a hot bath to soak away the dust and weariness of the long trip, but a flash of anger shocked everything out of her but a wish to break something solid over Jim Lord's tousled black head. She clenched her hands.

"Oh, never you mind, Mr. Lord, I won't keep you another second! I suppose you can carry my suitcases—if it won't make you too tired to—to do whatever you said to those poor cows! I'm ready!"

"Now hold on—" Jim spluttered, but Lynn had already marched stiffly to the door. She hugged Aunt Jane and shook hands with Warren.

"Thanks for everything—you've been wonderful!"

"You come visit us if you get a chance, honey." Aunt Jane patted Lynn's shoulder and added soothingly, "Don't let Jim fret your mind. He's just forgotten how to be young."

"As far as I'm concerned," Lynn burst out, "he never was young—he's grouchy and selfish and mean!"

Right behind her, Jim Lord chuckled sardonically. "I'm glad you found it all out right away, Miss Mather. Save trouble for both of us." His hands were full of suitcases so he just nodded to the Edwards. "So long, folks. Probably won't be seeing you for a while, unless," and he jerked his head toward Lynn, "Miss Mather gets sick of the ranch like the last two teachers did."

Lynn glared at him. "I've contracted for the term and I'll teach it! Let's go, Mr. Lord, I thought you were in a hurry!"

"You'll find out," he said laconically and strode off with her suitcases.

Worried and resentful, Lynn stared after him a minute before she forced a smile, turned, and waved goodby to the Edwards. They were such nice folks—it was an awful letdown to go straight from them to a place where, to judge from Jim Lord, she wasn't welcome. Following him to the waiting buckboard, Lynn set her firm little jaw.

In her two years of teaching, she hadn't fallen down on the job, no matter what. And Jim Lord, with his arrogant gray gaze and nasty remarks, wasn't going to scare her. She avoided his grudgingly offered help and climbed up on the seat, fixed her stare on a thunderhead far in the east, and settled herself for the drive.

THEY JOLTED along for an hour without a word. The road turned into a rutted, hog-backed, spine jarring wagon trail. The mountains looked grimmer and Lynn braced herself to keep from shivering. Friendly place she was going to!

"If you don't quit sittin' so stiff instead of hangin' on," drawled Jim Lord, "you're going to get pitched off. We've still got twenty miles to go."

"Lordy!" groaned Lynn before she remembered she wasn't speaking to

him. "I see why they call it an isolated school!"

"Yeah," said Jim. "I don't hold with sending youngsters to board in town. Matter of fact I think they're better off with what I can teach 'em. Mr. Edwards means well but he's kind of hipped on education. Well, every wolf to its own tune."

Giving Jim a cold stare, Lynn demanded, "Are you forgetting that education happens to be my tune, too?"

"I'll tell you right now," Jim said drily, "I don't aim to have a stranger whippin' my boys and making them ashamed. You understand that, Miss Mather?"

Pure outrage flaming in her, she leaned over and said between gritted teeth, "I'm not a brute or a—a tyrant, Mr. Lord, but my pupils are going to behave during school hours!"

"I reckon we'll cross that bridge when we come to it." His face was closed and tight, as if he didn't even like to have her around, as if he resented her physical presence. "By the way, even teachers can learn on the Split Arrow. There's some things you don't do—like going back inside the big cave just down the road from the ranch. It's full of big gaps and pits that don't have any bottom. Hate to lose you, so I'm warning you now." His tone was mocking.

"What's the matter with you?" Lynn demanded, fighting back angry tears. "Why do you hate teachers—or is it me?"

He tightened the reins and stared down at her. Something seemed to flicker deep in his eyes. Then his face was a mask again. "Miss Mather, you may be a nice youngster, and I know you're just doing the job you were hired for. I'll be polite and try to make things convenient for you. But I don't like having other people tell my kids how to act and what to think."

"What does your wife think of all this?" flashed Lynn. "Does she think it's criminal to be a teacher?"

"She must not have," Jim said grimly. "She was one."

"Was? Well—then why, I mean, where—?"

"You mean why isn't she teaching them?" Jim Lord looked straight ahead. "Why, she got bored with ranching and having a husband and three kids. She sloped off for Saint Louis, got a divorce, and I reckon is teaching other things right now. She sure educated me."

Lynn flushed, she wanted suddenly to reach out and touch his hand only he didn't want sympathy. In fact, he didn't want anything she could give him. She tightened her hands on the seat.

"I'm sorry," she said.

IT WAS TEN o'clock when they drove up in front of the big log and stone ranch house. "I'll take you in before I put up the horses," Jim said. Lynn was stiff and cold but she managed to be standing on the ground before he came around to her. She wasn't going to give him the tiniest reason for thinking a second teacher might be willing to marry him.

He grunted, picked up her luggage, and stood back to let her go up the porch and into the house. She waited for him to open the door; when he didn't, but stood there impatiently holding her suitcases, Lynn tilted her chin, turned the door knob and went on in. It was a big room, kitchen, dining room, and parlor all in one. Lynn's glance took in that much in spite of the blonde woman who sat near the fireplace with three boys sprawled around her.

Like an ad for the happy married life, Lynn thought. The woman got up and managed somehow to welcome Jim at the same she was scanning Lynn with a coldly suspicious smile, one of those things men never notice and women never miss.

"The boys wanted to stay up and see their daddy," the blonde cooed,

coming forward in a smooth glide that displayed a healthily rounded body. "And of course they wanted to meet their new teacher."

The boys, all with black straight hair and varying shades of blue and gray eyes, didn't move. Lynn faced three small, mutely hostile faces, and tried to smile winningly, though all the time she was trying to puzzle out what the other woman had been telling them to put them in such a mood.

Jim put down the suitcases. He looked at his sons in a way that showed he thought them nothing less than perfect though his voice was gruff.

"Boys, say howdy to your teacher, Miss Lynn Mather."

"Howdy," they muttered.

"I'm awfully glad to meet you." Lynn tried a bright little laugh that seemed to echo cavernously. "What are your names?"

Three pairs of eyes stared at her, gloomily, as if the thing they greatly feared had come upon them. Jim coughed apologetically without sounding the least bit sorry. He stepped over and sort of scooped the boys up in a protective bear hug.

"Tom, Brad, and Danny," Jim said. "Starting at right. Danny's six, Brad's eight, and Tom's nine." The blond woman passed her arm possessively through Jim's and smiled up at him.

"And you're thirty, the biggest boy of all. Well, introduce me to the young lady, Jim! After all, we're sharing her room tonight. Pa thought it would be nice for me to make her feel welcome."

You're really succeeding, aren't you? Lynn looked into the woman's mocking green eyes and spoke before Jim could. "I've heard about you, Miss Owens. Mrs. Edwards said you were—neighborly."

"I'll bet she did." Madge Owens laughed but her tone was brittle and she watched Lynn with more respect. "No one has told me about you, though; I guess I'll have to find out myself."

"We live and learn," Lynn shot back. "Some of us even teach." Jim had moved away from Madge. He looked uneasy.

"Boys, you hustle to bed. Madge, you show Miss Mather her room, will you? I've got to unhitch the team."

MADGE STOOD so that the firelight silhouetted her ripe form. "Run along, Jim. Lynn and I will manage just fine." Jim nodded and went out. Danny, Brad, and Tom didn't move, they sat like brooding little black-thatched owls and watched Lynn. Lynn decided she might as well test them now as later.

"Your father told you to go to bed," she said in her best firm but gentle teacher's voice. "I think you'd better. Classes start in the morning."

"No'm," said Tom. "Dad says we can watch the dehorning. We're going to hold the rags and turpentine to put on the stumps."

Lynn bit her tongue to keep from saying something hot and unflattering. "I'll talk to your father about that," she said grimly. "Right now, it's time to go to sleep."

They just looked at her.

Triumph glinted in Madge's eyes as she went over and handed each child a paper-wrapped piece of candy. "Go on to bed, boys. Do you want to hug Auntie Madge?"

Lynn wanted to kick her. Bribing the kids—was that how Madge got along with them? The boys unwrapped the candies, popped them in their mouths. Then, solemnly, as if it were a ritual or payment, they embraced Madge and trotted from the room.

One little, two little, three little Injuns—, Lynn thought wildly. What a set-up! A man who hated teachers, boys who glared at them—and worst of all, a Madge Owen who quite plainly had schemes. Madge smoothed her dress snugly across her hips, pushed

back her brassy yellow hair like a challenging flag.

"You just have to know how to handle them, dearie," she taunted sweetly.

Lynn jerked around. It was a struggle to keep her voice level. "My name is Lynn—or Miss Mather. And I wouldn't bribe a child if—if it made their father so mad he wouldn't speak to me!"

Madge shrugged. "What can you do? Jim has a fit if an outsider looks crossways at 'em." She picked up one suitcase and started down the hall, while Lynn struggled with the larger one. "Once we're married," Madge said, and her face hardened, "things'll be different. But till then—well, *Miss Mather,* I'm not losing a trick—to you or anyone!"

They were inside the end room, a comfortable room with a big double bed and round, hand-made rug in front of the huge oak dresser. Lynn set down the suitcase. She would have about as soon shared her night with a Gila monster but she was darned if she'd let Madge guess it.

"Don't panic, Miss Owens. I'm here to teach school. Keep out of my way and I'll keep out of yours."

Madge paused, glanced up from undressing, her smooth plump shoulders bared. She showed her slightly pointed little white teeth in a smile. "You sound like a smart girl, honey. I hope you turn out to be. I've waited ten years on Jim, ever since I was fifteen, and I'm going to get him."

"You'll get three mean little kids, too," Lynn couldn't keep from pointing out. Madge stretched lazily out on the bed, her hair like a harsh gold on the pillows.

"Like I said, those brats may get a shock. But I don't think you'll be around to see it and you won't tell Jim what I've said, either."

"Why won't I?"

"Because," tittered Madge, "he'll think you're lying—and on top of that that you're trying to run his household. Sweet dreams, teacher!"

Grimly, Lynn unpacked every stitch she had before she undressed, washed in the basin on the stand, and brushed out her dark curly hair. Madge slumbered placidly, or pretended to. Lynn blew out the lamp and got in bed, as far from Madge's sprawled shape as possible.

It would serve Jim Lord with his suspicions and silly grudges right if he woke up married to Madge Owens—a Madge who would quickly drop the candy treatment. Lynn told herself this several times, and with resentful fervor, but she still had a hard time going to sleep. In lots of ways, Jim was as young as his sons.

HE WAS, however, very much the head of his house next morning. Lynn had woke up in broad daylight, the sunshine filling the room, and rolled over gingerly to see that Madge was gone.

Goodness, it must be late! Lynn wanted to start classes that morning. She sprang out of bed and dressed in a hurry, wondering if there wouldn't be more pupils than Brad, Tom, and Danny. Warren Edwards had explained that in cases where a group of children were too far from school to attend, the school district furnished books and a teacher while the family supplied a schoolroom and boarded the teacher. Which Jim Lord seemed to do with reluctance.

Tossing her head, Lynn frowned at herself in the mirror, experimented with a smile that made her brown eyes dance, and then tied her hair back with a yellow ribbon which exactly matched her full-skirted dress. She would be as nice and winning as she could to the boys—the poor kids hadn't any mother, no one but that brass-hearted bribing Madge. But as for Jim and his steely wariness—he had just better be nice or she'd ignore him!

That hadn't been hard to do. Jim

hadn't been in the house. Choking with vexation, Lynn ate a lonely breakfast. The big clock struck nine as she drank the last swallow of lukewarm coffee and started to wash the dishes in the enameled dish-pan. Not a sign of the boys or Madge, either. Maybe Madge had gone home.

As for the boys—. Lynn tightened her lips. She was pretty sure she was going to have to march down to wherever Jim was dehorning cows, and make them drop their turpentine rags to pick up pencils and books instead. The minute the dishes were done, Lynn smoothed her hair, took a long breath, and hurried outside.

The Split Arrow's scattered sheds and corrals lay spread below the house. There was one big barn. In the lot next to it, Jim Lord and two other men were wrestling cows.

Sure enough, there were Brad, Tom, and Danny—three small intent miniatures of men in their levis and plaid shirts, each clutching a rag. Tom, as befitted the eldest, held a can. Lynn gathered up her skirts and went grimly down the slope.

She got there just as the two men holding a struggling cow, jumped up, and let it loose. It scrabbled wildly to its feet, bloodshot eyes rolling horribly, and ran straight for Lynn. The places where its horns had been still dripped blood and turpentine, giving the brindled creature a terrifying look.

Frozen, Lynn watched it come. She couldn't even scream. Then Jim Lord whirled and saw her. He gave a yell of warning and disgust and dived for the cow, landing in an absurd sprawling tackle just as the other men got around in front of Lynn. The cow shot out of Jim's grasp, bounded sideways past the others, and went galloping off, bawling madly.

Jim got up, dusting the dirt off his clothes. His helpers who had been chuckling quit in a hurry and drifted away from Lynn. She felt like a fool but she glared right back at Jim.

"Miss Mather," he said explosively, "Don't you have a brain to bless yourself with? Don't you know anything about cows? And what the heck are you doing down here, anyway, slowing us up?"

Lynn fought back tears of rage. She stepped forward till she was almost standing on his toes. "I came down here to get my pupils, that's what! You know perfectly well they've got to go regular hours just as if it were any school!"

"I figure they'll need to know how to dehorn cows a lot worse than they'll need whatever you can teach 'em." His jaw hardened; he looked as rough and unfriendly as the mountains. "What's more, before she left this morning, Madge told me you got to ordering the boys around last night, tried to make them go to bed. That was none of your job, bossing them."

"I'll bet Madge told you they went right away when *she* asked them!" Lynn flared. She wanted to rake her nails down across that infuriating, handsome face, make him darn well know she was a person, not just a species he happened to hate. "Well, Mr. Lord, from now on, I won't ask them to move out of the way of an avalanche if it happens to come after school hours. But right now, they're coming up and studying their lessons! So you just tell them yourself or I will!"

A MUSCLE jerked in his cheek. He put out his hands and grabbed her wrists. Lynn struggled for a second but he was too strong to fight and anyway her pupils and two strangers were watching. A strange thrill leaped through her blood from where his fingers rested. Lynn realized that whether she liked it or not, she was powerfully drawn to this man and had been from the moment he stood so tall and brusque in the Edwards' door.

Maybe something in her face told him. However it was he dropped her

hands and stepped back with grudging admiration.

"You speak up, don't you, and not just to kids? I reckon the boys can go back with you." He jerked his head toward the two men who had been helping him. "Those fellas live down the road a piece. Each one has a couple of youngsters that'll be coming to school up here. I've fixed the spare bedroom right off the parlor for the school. The neighbor kids ought to be here by the time my boys get cleaned up. Go get your books ready and I'll see you get your students."

Lynn felt shaky. She had a fierce longing to reach up and smooth back his hair, tell him to forget what that other woman, his wife, had done. He had already turned to his sons. Who liked Madge and Madge's bribery and were probably going to fight Lynn every step of the way.

You picked a mighty fine time to fall in love, she told herself. Whirling away, she went up the slope.

SHE SPENT that morning trying to convince seven children that paper was to write on, not make spitballs from, and that two and two make four. Only, for herself, things didn't seem to add up. She told herself maybe a hundred times that Jim Lord was the last man on earth to love. By the time lunch came, she was so tired of the glum stares of Brad, Danny and Tom, that she believed it.

Then Jim came in for lunch, which he cooked, quickly and efficiently, and Lynn looked across the table at him and her crazy heart did handstands no matter what her brain said. A strand of hair had fallen down over his forehead and it gleamed like a wild bird's wing. He was civil but had little to say.

"You have any trouble with the boys," he said, as he picked up his hat to go back to work, "come tell me about it and I'll settle it."

Lynn didn't answer. She just looked hopelessly at the three sullen children. *He's got them trained like dogs,* she thought. *They obey and love only one person—unless you bribe them like Madge.* She led the way back to the schoolroom and the afternoon's lessons.

A WEEK PASSED. The boys unbent once in awhile, and then Madge would drop by for a visit, and they'd be suspicious and surly again. Lynn was sorry for the boys and disgusted with them at the same time—which, with the addition of love, was how she felt about Jim.

Since that morning in the barn lot, he never wavered in courtesy, but he wasn't friendly, either. Sometimes, though, Lynn would feel his gaze on her and when she would glance up, his eyes had a funny questioning in them before the wariness came back and he turned away. Lynn, remembering the Edwards' friendliness, felt lonesome and shut out, especially when Madge came. She always brought candy or playthings for the boys and Jim seemed to watch them laughing with pleasure, though as far as Lynn could see, he was passionately involved with the blond woman. That wasn't any comfort. Jim would marry faster to suit his sons than he would to please himself.

Then one morning when Lynn went into the schoolroom, only the neighbor children were there. Brad, Tom, and Danny were nowhere in the house. She gave the pupils some spelling words to study, told them to stay in the room, and went out looking for the missing three with blood in her eye.

After all Jim had said, he'd better not be encouraging them to play hooky! She remembered that Jim had gone to cut timber with a neighbor that day. Angrily setting her jaw, she marched down the road that led to the houses below, winding past the bluffs where the cave was which Jim had

warned her about. As she got level with the woods which shrouded the cave, she thought she heard someone calling. Lynn stopped and listened.

It sounded like a woman—and whoever it was calling the names of Jim's sons. Lynn knew what had happened and plunged through the trees with grim fury.

Madge had coaxed the boys to play hooky. Maybe for a picnic at the cave. Could Jim know? Lynn pushed on through the woods. The voice rose and fell in panic that began to drive some of the unreasoning anger from Lynn.

Were the boys in trouble? And if they were, why wasn't Madge doing something besides shrieking her head off? Lynn burst out of the brush, heedless of her scratched face and hands as she scanned the cave. Then she saw Madge—alone, standing just outside the gaping dark mouth and yelling through cupped hands. A picnic basket was beside her, all spilled and jumbled.

"Brad! Tom! Danny! Come out—and—and I'll give you lots of candy! Come out! Come on, you little devils!"

There wasn't any answer.

Lynn's heart caught in her throat. Those chasms back inside, those bottomless pits no one came back from—. She ran up and seized Madge, panted for breath as she tried to shake the terrified woman into sanity.

"What's happened? Are the boys in there?"

Madge's face was sweating, she seemed half crazy with rage and fear. "The—the little monsters ran back in there. I've begged them but they won't answer!" Lynn was already heading for the dark frightening entrance.

"Why didn't you get them?" she shot back over her shoulder.

"I'm afraid!" Madge wailed. "I—I'd rather die than go!" Then, as Lynn groped her way, a terrible laugh floated echoing into the cave. "Go on, get killed! I'll tell Jim you made the boys go in! You damned fool!"

Lynn kept going. She couldn't see a thing. "Tom—," she called. No answer. The walls of the cave were narrowing. She jerked her hand back from the dripping slime, edged ahead a foot at a time, calling first one boy and then the other.

AFTER WHAT seemed an eternity of groping in the horrible dark, Lynn heard a faint answer. She went faster, her heart thudding in her ears. If any grown person had gotten back in here, for all of her, they'd have stayed. But three little boys—oh, even if they hated you, you couldn't let them fall in a long dark that had no ending—not in this life. She almost tripped over a small body and then she had two boys in her arms, they ran weeping to her.

"Danny's hurt his leg—he started to fall and we dragged him up but his leg won't go! Oh, Miss Lynn—!"

Lynn thought, then he did stumble, it nearly was the pit. Very gently, she said, "Don't cry, boys. I'll carry Danny. Each of you get hold of my skirt and hang tight. We'll be out in the sun in just a little while."

When they came out of the cave, Lynn laid Danny down and felt along his leg. He was conscious again. He looked up at her and grinned faintly. His leg wasn't broken, but his ankle was sprained, for he winced when he sat up and tested it.

Lynn had been getting steadily mad-

der. Just because the brats wouldn't mind, they'd practically gotten themselves killed. It would kill Jim if anything happened to them. *This won't happen again!* she promised silently, and though she knew she was ruining any chance she might ever have with Jim, she stood up, dusted off her hands and grabbed Tom.

"This is to teach you to mind!" she blazed, and, yanking that young man over her knee, she spanked him till her palm smarted. He was still wailing when she finished with Brad.

Panting, she glared at Danny. "I guess that ankle'll teach you! Now maybe you'll mind without being fed candy and begged and—!" A shrill voice cut in from behind her.

"You saw her, Jim! Are you going to let her beat your children?" Lynn spun around. She felt too awful to look at Jim, but she said quietly to Madge: "You did tell him, didn't you? But they aren't dead. I hope from now on they'll have enough sense to keep away from you." She turned away.

"I—I guess I'd better send word to Mr. Edwards that Split Arrow needs a new teacher."

Jim moved all of a sudden. He caught Lynn in his arms and held her. "No—we need you. You—you've taught me and the boys a lot today. Madge, you'd better go on home."

"Yeah!" broke in Tom. He rubbed off a few remaining tears and went over to grab Lynn's hand. "Madge wouldn't come help! But Lynn did! She can spank me all she wants to!"

Fury contorted Madge's face; then she wheeled and ran. Jim gave Lynn a little shake.

"I still think," he said sternly, "that only a kid's folks should have the teachin' and punishin' of him. If you—well, if you still want the job, it can be worked out. Permanent."

Lynn let her kiss answer him. "I love teaching!" she said.

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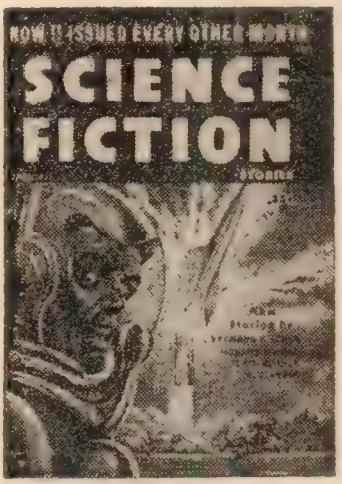

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Until now, when she was ready to pack and go East, Candace hadn't realized how much she'd longed for comfort and saftey — without Jim Braddock being around to infuriate her.

PIONEER ROMANCE

by Jan Ryder

CANDACE smiled enchantingly, lifted her long full skirts until her unaccustomed highheeled slippers showed, curtsied to the bureau and took a few gliding waltz steps. But the rhythm couldn't match her inner excitement.

Flinging back her head she broke into a wild Arapaho Indian dance, skirts billowing wide with each abandoned movement. Then her heel caught on the hooked rug. Sprawling forward, she clutched her featherbed and fell into it, laughing.

She couldn't even dance circumspectly anymore. But it wouldn't take long to put aside the harum scarum ways Don objected to, and become civilized again.

Even though her father was in command of Fort Laramie, this was the first time in the eighteen months of their duty she'd been dressed in Eastern finery. She'd practically lived in short fringed skirts, blouses and moccasins, black hair in untamed confusion, free from braids and pins.

This was the first time, too, she'd actually faced up to the wonderful fact that in three days she'd be returning East with Don, whose Army service as her father's *aide-de-camp* would

be completed. She felt like celebrating tonight. Soon they'd be married and she'd be wearing ballgowns every day. She smiled happily. Well, almost. Sometimes she'd have to be managing his St. Louis house. He'd have no complaint then about her hoydenish ways. Candace promised herself that.

Until now, when she was ready to pack, she hadn't realized just how deeply she'd longed for comforts. She'd leave behind the barren Fort on the banks of the Platte, the heat, the drenching rains, the Indian raids and the isolation of the small garrison.

True, the monotony had been broken by occasional wagon trains en route to Santa Fe and the Mexican provinces, loaded to the hubs with trade goods. Grim-faced women and determined men came with the trains heading for the unknown, driven by the undying belief in the potentiality of the West.

Candace frowned. She'd felt that potentiality herself, but she was through with privations. She'd had enough pioneering to last a lifetime. Of that she was very sure.

Shouts and raucous voices rose from inside the stockade. Horses clattered through the wooden gates. Don's patrol had returned!

Candace struggled to her feet, rearranged her dress, stuck a bone hairpin more securely into her coronet of braids. Suddenly shy in her finery, she decided not to run outside to meet him as she usually did. Instead, she sedately went downstairs to the living room.

Indian mats brightened the rough plank floors, curtains hid the ugly square windows. This morning Blue Feather, her little Indian maid, had brought in armsful of prairie flowers. Candace rearranged them now self-consciously.

Then she heard a man's laugh.

Her heart beat crazily and she walked to the front door as rapidly as her high heels would permit. It was Jim Braddock.

A wagon train from Missouri was due tomorrow. She knew, because the sergeant's wife was expected. But Candace hadn't known that Jim was one of the scouts. She leaned back against the doorjamb fingers tight against her lips. In her plans to leave Laramie she'd turned from the thought of Jim. She'd been sure she'd be gone before he passed by again.

Somewhere along the Fort road he'd found Blue Feather who sat on the saddle in front of him, giggling happily. He slid her to the ground, said something to the guards, and rode directly toward Candace.

He was tall and lean, bronzed by a hundred suns. His buckskins were stained and he needed a haircut.

HE BROUGHT his mount to a dancing standstill, half saluted. A brightness flashed in his blue eyes making her suddenly conscious of bare shoulders and lowcut bodice. Again, there was between them that which had disconcerted her from the start. A certain knowledgeableness in him of her—of all women. An awareness of the expectancy he raised and certain of the dormant fires in her. Not in Candace alone, but in every woman. And being aware, he ignored it.

She despised herself now, feeling the physical impact of him as surely as though she were in his arms. The appeal as raw as the land she was leaving.

A ghost of mockery was in his smile. "I rode ahead of the train with dispatches for the Colonel," he said, then added unexpectedly, "Blue Feather says you're leaving. Somehow, I didn't think you'd give up, but how wrong can a man be?" He wheeled his horse and rode toward her father's cubbyhole of an office in the corner of the stockade yard.

Candace looked after him.

She heard a step behind her and

whirled. Don, trim in his lieutenant's uniform, stood there, eyes lit in delighted surprise.

"Darling," he said, "you're beautiful and I love you."

His admiration coming at this moment gave her the measure of security she needed. When he slid his hands down her soft bare shoulders and strained her to him, she kissed him with more than usual fervor.

A minute later he led her to a chair in the living room beside the open hearth and looked down at her. "You're sure this is what you want? To go back to a city?" There was deep unease in him.

"You heard Jim didn't you?" she flared. "Well, don't let him bother you. Of course, I want to go." Candace was quite vehement about it.

"But," Don persisted, "you must be certain. You'll miss this life more than you realize. The freedom, the prairie. And, oh yes, *the feeling that you're bringing civilization to the wilds.* Isn't that what you call it?"

She caught his bitterness. She knew he'd strongly disapproved of her school for Blue Feather and other Indian children who came from the friendly teepees of the neighboring Arapahos. He hadn't been sympathetic toward her efforts to help the mothers of the village. He'd insisted she accomplished nothing.

She would miss all that. But since her father was going with them for a visit, it wouldn't be goodbye immediately to him. Just to her friends and to this rugged land.

Then she shifted uneasily in her chair and her gray eyes darkened. No one needed to tell her Jim had walked in. He came over and studied her.

"You're just as enticing as you planned, and we all appreciate it I'm sure." His brief smile took the sarcasm from the words and he turned to Don.

Candace watched them as they talked about Jim's trip, the temper of the Indians and the weather. Don was blond and slim with the patina of the East stamped on his patrician features, and she felt a surge of contentment. She'd be cherished, respected and, though at times she might find his conventional pattern a trifle onerous, theirs would be a wonderful marriage.

LIFE WITH Jim certainly wouldn't fall into that pattern for any girl. Candace had recognized this from the time of their first meeting a year ago. Respected on the trail, fearless, still she knew him for the ruthless hard man he was, with unexpected flashes of kindness. Blue Feather adored him.

He caught her gaze and his eyes searched hers. Suddenly he grinned. "By the way, the Colonel said you'd put up a couple of people tonight. They're coming in ahead of the train and should be along soon."

Candace jumped up. "Company's fun," she said. "I'll see about supper." And she started toward the kitchen.

Jim called after her. "She's going to be plenty bushed. It's been a hard trip and I thought she could do with a good night's sleep."

Candace stopped still. "A girl?"

"Glory Linton and her father." And again there was that ghost of mockery.

Don laughed. "Don't tell me you've fallen in love. Not you, a confirmed bachelor."

Jim's response was light. "Maybe so, just maybe so."

Candace didn't wait to hear more. She fled to the kitchen and almost bumped into her father coming through from his office.

He stared at her and his eyes misted. Crusty and brusque, he'd spoiled her and she idolized him. "You're so like your mother, my dear." He held her close for a moment, then cleared his throat. "Mr. Linton and his daughter. . . ."

"Jim just told me," she cut in.

Her father said he'd take Mr. Linton to the company mess for supper so

that the young folks could gossip without being bothered by graybeards. He patted her shoulder and went into the living room.

By the time Candace had finished her chores, an hour had passed and the small cavalcade pounded into the stockade. Guards sprang to take the mounts and the Colonel and Jim went outside.

She watched through the window, Don at her side. A girl tumbled off into Jim's arms. It was too dark now, to see her clearly but not too dark to see that Jim held her a trifle too long.

"You didn't think I'd let you get away, did you?" she demanded merrily.

Candace said, "Ugg."

"You're not jealous, are you?" Don laughed.

Candace looked at him. "Don't be a fool."

Then Glory Linton walked in ahead of the men, hands outstretched. "You're Candace, of course. Jim told me all about you. And you're wonderful to let us stay here tonight." She turned to Don and smiled up into his eyes. "And this is your lieutenant."

Don beamed and Candace murmured a welcome she didn't quite feel. The Colonel took Mr. Linton off to his office.

Glory scarcely noticed they left. She pouted prettily. "Your dress is wonderful, Candace, and look at poor little me. I'm a wreck."

It accomplished what she intended, Don and Jim looked. Candace did too, though she hated herself for it. Glory was like a Dresden doll and knew it.

Don shook his head. "No one would believe you've been riding for miles."

And he was right. Her habit was as fresh as though she'd just put it on. The sun and dust hadn't marred her peach complexion. Her hair was a perfection of golden curls. Candace suspected she'd worn a bonnet until she could make her entrance. And she bit her lip.

She mustn't forget that this girl had made the long trek from Missouri. That took courage and hard work. Against her will, Candace was forced to salute her.

Almost imperiously, though with coquetry, Gloria took charge. Jim was to bring in her box immediately so she could make herself presentable. She looked up at Don through long lashes. "You just wait right here until I get prettied, then you're going to tell me all about the West."

IN THE bedroom Candace poured water from the pitcher on the commode and set out fresh huck towels. Glory washed and changed into a devastating dress which further accentuated her charm. Plainly, she thought conversation between girls a sheer waste of time.

Candace sitting on a chair, watched her thoughtfully. Finally she asked, "Are you going to marry Jim?"

Glory patted rice powder on her nose, turning her head this way and that to study the effect in the mirror before she answered. "I expect," she said. Then she turned around, leaned back against the bureau knocking Candace's only box of powder to the floor. Glory ignored it.

"Jim didn't tell me you were this attractive." Her eyes narrowed. "But," she shrugged, "what difference? No one can take him away."

"Wait a second," Candace said, fury rising in her. "I'm marrying Don, remember?"

"Your Don's nice." Glory lingered over his name and then walked out of the room.

Candace wanted to throw the water pitcher after her. Instead, she made ineffectual swipes at the powder. Was it possible Jim could have fallen in love with this girl? She continued to wonder as she watched Glory flirt with

Don and Jim, making each feel important. It was a gift, she decided.

She got up to see if supper were ready and kicked Don on the ankle. His fatuous expression was more than she could bear. But he didn't even notice the kick.

Jim followed her to the dining room. "Isn't Glory something though?" he demanded.

Candace could only nod. As she turned she caught that mockery again, but didn't care. She'd never been so surprised and shocked in her life. And disgusted. How could any sensible man like this girl? But she got her answer a little later during supper.

"I just think buffalo stew is wonderful," Glory announced, when Don passed the tureen. "You see, I'm a pioneer already."

Candace remembered grim-faced women and determined men heading west. This girl would never be a pioneer if she lived to be a hundred.

But Jim, as though reading her thoughts said, "We need people like Glory, decorative and helpless. It does a man good. Don't you agree, Don?"

Candace watched him thoughtfully. His agreement came fast.

Glory smiled at Don and reached over to take Jim's hand. "You'll never know how wonderful Jim was on the trip. He waited on me hand and foot. I like men to wait on me," she added as though that were necessary. "Santa Fe's going to be wonderful," she prattled on, "the fandangos, the caballeros."

Candace flinched. If she heard "wonderful" again she'd explode. Instead she passed the cornbread. "You don't want to pioneer really," she said lightly. "You just want to shift your field of operation. Isn't that so?"

Don scowled, but Jim burst into laughter. Gloria flashed a startled look at Candace and pouted.

"A girl's got to pioneer if she's going with me," Jim said and teetered back on his chair. "This is my last scouting trip. I haven't told Glory, but I've accepted an offer from The American Fur Company to take over one of their trading posts."

CANDACE stared incredulously. "Where?" she asked.

"On the Green River beyond the mountains where the waters run west." His eyes sparkled as he talked on. "It's a small desolate outpost at present, but I'll build its trade and there's money to be made. The mountain men, the fur trappers come in twice a year for rendezvous, with their catch. Indians," he looked at Candace, "will be around for company." Then he turned to Glory. "Think you'll like it, honey?"

There was a long silence before she nodded her head. "You can always take care of me, I guess. But do I have to have Indians for company? I don't like them."

The men roared, even Candace had to smile. "You're a plucky little thing," Don told her, admiration in his eyes. "Pioneering's all right for those that like it." He smiled. "Thank God, Candace and I are getting out of this pesthole. We've had enough."

Candace's eyes met Jim's and slid away.

It was after supper when they were back in the living room that Don put his hand on Glory's shoulder. "Want to look around the stockade?" he asked a bit diffidently.

"Is it safe?" Then she dimpled at him. "How silly. As though you aren't strong enough to save me from anything." She flashed a look of triumph at Candace. She'd just won some kind of victory apparently, but Candace didn't know just what it was.

Candace continued to watch the door after they disappeared into the dim-lit yard. Without looking at Jim she said, "You're the best scout in the West. You know every inch of the trail from Santa Fe to Independence. Even the Indians fear and respect you.

Why, Jim? Why leave? It isn't money, I know that."

He walked over to the fireplace, stood with his back against it and rolled a cigarette. The lamp light flickered on his set face.

"I want to be in at the kill and help drive the Hudson Bay Company off American soil. I don't like to see the English grabbing the lucrative fur trade which rightfully belongs to Americans. The American Fur Company's going to get into a real fight with the English Crowd."

It was a long speech for him. He pinched out his cigarette and came to look deep in her eyes.

Jim had never touched her. He didn't now. But the expectancy was there rushing through her and she felt her temples throb. She got up and walked restlessly over to a small table and moved the flower bowl and then went back to her chair again.

"And Glory will go with you?" She kept it casual.

He shrugged. "She'd be a diversion certainly and she is very beautiful. In her own way," he added. "But you, Candace. I want to talk about you. Are you very sure *you're* going to be happy in a city?"

It was the second time today she'd been asked this and she flared now as she had earlier. "What possible difference could it make to you?"

"I WANT YOU to be happy. It's that simple," he said. "You've made a real contribution here to the country. Even though it's been in a small way, still it's started something fine. The children you've taught will pass along the education and ideals you've implanted. Some of it, at least has brushed off. As time goes on it will lead to better cooperation between the Indians and the whites.

"And by the way," he smiled as Candace flushed under his praise, "I did a little missionary work for you. The sergeant's wife, as you know, is with the wagon train. She hasn't any children of her own and is anxious to take over your school. You see," his voice was very sober, "I had a hunch you'd be leaving. But your work will continue, Candace, I promise."

Candace sprang up, her large gray eyes dark with emotion. "Oh, Jim," she cried. "How kind, how very kind." Only he had really appreciated what her school had meant.

Glory ran in then, curls awry, Don striding beside her. "Guess what," she cried. "I went up to the top of the stockade walls and saw a cannon. They're wonderful."

Candace leaned her head back and closed her eyes for a moment.

Jim grinned. "We'll have our own private cannon on the Green River." He kissed her lightly, thanked Candace for supper and told them goodnight.

Glory said reluctantly, "I have to have my beauty sleep. Thanks for everything."

After her footsteps no longer sounded, Candace laughed. "Well, what do you think of her? For Jim I mean."

"We'll have friends like that back home," Don said slowly, a nostalgia deep in his voice. "It's a damn shame she isn't going to be there. She'd be a help to you."

"To me?" Candace was startled.

"Yes. She knows all the right people. And I think it's a shame she's marrying Jim. Not that he isn't all right, but to bury her in the wilderness." He shook his head. "You like her, too, don't you?" he demanded eagerly.

"I do not." Candace was firm. Don caught her up into his arms then and tilted her chin so as to watch her expression the more carefully. "Why are you worrying so about Jim? I've sometimes thought you were in love with him yourself."

"No," she said. "I'm not. Sometimes I even despise him, but he's kind." She didn't elaborate. Don wouldn't understand.

Satisfied, he kissed her and she clung to him before she said goodnight.

Later, with Glory's even breathing beside her she couldn't sleep. If only she could saddle up and ride across the prairie. She'd done it before. And let the wind blow through her hair and clear her mental cobwebs. Don had violently objected to her night rides.

Somehow, Glory was civilization to him. With her here, Don would hate it more if she rode tonight.

Careful not to disturb Glory, she turned over and buried her face in the goose-feather pillow.

THE NEXT morning scream after scream broke through Candace's sleep. She sat bolt upright. Glory, next to her was cowering and half yelling, "She'll massacre me. She'll kill me."

Standing beside the bed, staring wide eyed was Blue Feather. Candace laughed and shook Glory. "Be still. It's all right. Quiet," she ordered, but Glory clung to her.

Quietly Candace asked Blue Feather to bring their coffee to the dining room and the little girl trotted out, but not before Candace had seen her eyes, baneful with hate.

Maybe Glory's trip had been a nightmare of fear along the way. And Candace felt real sympathy for the girl as she explained how sweet and harmless Blue Feather was.

But Glory wasn't to be placated. "Keep her away from me," she shrilled and turned her back to cover her head with the patchwork quilt.

Candace got out of bed, washed her face and slipped into a short skirt and blouse, she slid her feet into moccasins. Today she didn't bother to pin up her hair. She had to find Blue Feather. The child not only was scared at Glory's outburst, but could harbor real hatred which wouldn't be good for her or anyone else.

The Indian girl wasn't in the living room or kitchen. Then Candace caught sight of her in the courtyard talking to Jim. She hurried out.

"Glory's certainly going to be a great help to you," she told Jim bitterly and drew the child close. She patted her. "Will you run along, honey, and bring me that cup of coffee please?" She smiled and the tenseness in Blue Feather broke. She trotted toward the house.

"Your girl's going to be quite a pioneer," Candace said.

Jim said, "What do you care?" He smiled. "That's what you asked me."

"I don't care," she snapped.

He looked at her and there was that infuriating ghost of mockery.

Candace slapped him then. She ran across the courtyard and into the house, his laugh following her. She'd never done a thing like that in her life. Now, she didn't know what had possessed her.

Just inside the door, Don caught her wrist and halted her. "I won't stand for your hoodlum behavior," he said sternly. "You're going to change your ways right now, or you'll disgrace us both in St. Louis."

Candace had never seen him so enraged. She rubbed the back of her hand wearily across her forehead.

"Suppose," he went on, "you take a leaf out of Glory's book and watch how she behaves."

Candace nodded. "I'm sorry, darling. Believe me." And she was. Not only that Don had seen her, but that she'd stooped to slap Jim. Though he deserved a lot more than that.

Glory came into the room then, feminine and beautiful. Her morning dress was the most delicate pink matching her cheeks. Her curls were in place. She looked utterly Eastern, utterly civilized.

After all, Candace brooded, I should look like that, too, I suppose. She felt like an Indian in her short skirt and long slim bare legs. And she knew Don was aware of the contrast.

GLORY TOLD Don then about Blue Feather scaring her. She did well, making quite a story of it.

Don was furious. "You might have kept that Indian out of her room, Candace."

Her room. Candace stiffened. Then because she couldn't resist it, she said, "Glory, maybe we can do something to take your mind off the Indians. The antelope are running. Would you like to go out with me to get some fresh meat for the Fort?" She knew she was being diabolic and simply didn't care.

Glory shuddered and Don just looked hard at Candace.

Why she wanted to needle this girl, she didn't know. Why should she annoy her? Glory would be gone with Jim and the wagon train and she and Don would be on their way.

She might have known she couldn't win. Glory asked sweetly, "Do you expect to dress like that in St. Louis?" Then not waiting for an answer she said decidedly, "I won't wear native clothes. Jim wouldn't like it. Jim's wonderful."

And Jim coming in raised an eyebrow.

Candace was saved from a reply by Blue Feather who peeked into the room. She got up to see what she wanted and was surprised when the child said, "Yellow flowers are on the river side if the golden lady wants to pick them." Then she turned and ran into the kitchen.

Candace was delighted she'd forgotten her momentary hatred. It seemed like a good idea, after the men left, Don for the commissary and Jim to see Mr. Linton and the Colonel. She suggested to Glory that she might want to pick the yellow flowers, since she, herself, would be busy packing and attending to household chores.

An hour or so later, Candace suddenly realized that Glory hadn't returned. She looked through the house and stockade yard, but there was no trace of her. Rather than startle her father she ran across to the small building where Don was.

Fortunately Jim was there too, checking supplies for his trip. "It's Glory," she cried as she burst into the room. And she told them about the yellow flowers. She didn't tell them that it had been Blue Feather's idea, or about the initial hatred. For now Candace was frightened. Under the veneer Blue Feather was, after all, an Indian.

Jim strode to the stables and Don yelled, "Saddle up!" Mounted they rode slowly through the gates. Glory couldn't have gone far. Jim and Don were stern as they spread out to pick up her trail. But Candace riding wide, only cut the path of a pair of garrison boots leading from the river toward the Fort.

Glory might have tripped or twisted her ankle. That could be bad. Very bad in this prairie country. She joined the men and they rode to converge on the Platte. After a moment, Jim decided to follow the river west. There was still no trace of Glory.

Candace groaned silently. It was her fault, she thought bitterly. Glory was terrified of Indians and Candace knew now that she couldn't trust Blue Feather's volatile temper. She wouldn't actually harm Glory, of that she was sure. But she could scare her half to death if she followed Glory.

Don't let anything happen to her, she prayed silently.

Don, riding beside Candace, was flushed and excited. Jim rejoined them, his face stony. She'd never seen a man as still as he.

IT WAS THEN they saw her around the river bend to the east. Glory was sitting in the shade of a boulder and they broke into a gallop. She didn't smile when they pulled up and slid to the ground beside her.

"Are you all right?" Jim demanded.

"Well," Glory blazed, "it's no thanks to Candace if I am. She deliberately sent me down here knowing there weren't any flowers. I was too frightened to move once I got here. Candace hoped I'd fall into the river or get scalped." She covered her face with her hands. "It was dreadful to sit for hours and hours alone waiting for someone to come and get me."

Don helped Glory up and caught her before she fainted. Candace looked down at the ground. Maybe Glory was justified in her anger. All she was thankful for was that Blue Feather hadn't annoyed Glory.

Then her eye caught the imprint of garrison boots by the boulder. She glanced quickly at Jim, but he was lifting Glory up in the saddle in front of Don who took her gently. Then they started riding slowly back to the Fort.

Glory put her head on Don's shoulder. "You're wonderful," she said and closed her eyes. But she kept her arm tight around him.

Candace spurred her horse ahead, jumped off and got some pillows to make the arm chair more comfortable. She waited. Jim carried Glory inside, she was smiling prettily up into his face as Don hovered near.

It was surprising how quickly Glory had recovered and Candace walked out of the house. She stood there, not sure whether she wanted to ride off her confusion, or send her horse to the stables.

She'd started across to the hitching rail when a good looking soldier stopped her. "Miss Glory's sure pretty, isn't she?" his eyes were dreamy. Then he explained that he'd been down to the river for a swim and had seen her just in time. They'd talked for an hour or more, but he finally had to leave for mess duty.

"She was sure nice. She wanted to stay there." He smiled.

"You're not to say one word to anyone about this," she told him fiercely. "I don't want to report you to the Colonel."

The man grinned. "Sure, Ma'am. Whatever you say. But she's sure pretty." He went off whistling.

The little cheat. Heaven help Jim, Candace thought as she swung into the saddle. She cut across the prairie.

It was much later when Candace returned, but none of them had even noticed her absence. Glory was still holding court. It continued through supper until finally Candace excused herself to pack. Laughter floated up from the living room and as she packed in a desultory sort of way, she felt left out and lonely. It was silly too, for all she had to do was to join them. But she couldn't endure watching Glory making fools of two perfectly nice men.

But she knew staying up here was inexcusable, so she went back down stairs to try to be a polite hostess. Glory even apologized for her earlier outburst.

"But it's wonderful to be with people." She shuddered slightly. "And not alone for hours as I was today."

CANDACE smiled sweetly. "You know, Glory, it wouldn't have been so bad if you'd had company." Maybe it was a mean thing to say, but she wasn't going to let Glory completely get by with her little adventure. Glory's look was pure venom.

Jim slanted a glance at Candace, his jaw tightened. Had he seen the imprints too. For his sake she hoped not. But even as she hoped it she knew instinctively that he had.

She was glad when the men insisted they leave so the girls could get some rest. Glory had to meet the wagon train in the morning and start west with Jim along the tortuous trail to Santa Fe.

Candace didn't want to talk so she undressed quickly, tumbled into bed and pretended to go to sleep instantly. Glory looked at her warily, waiting

for her to bring up the subject of the escapade. Candace didn't.

Much later Candace awakened to a man's guttural patois and a guard's hoarse voice. She slipped out of bed, to lean out the window. The moon was high and the prairie beyond the stockade was white and eerie.

She couldn't figure out what the commotion was all about. Then Jim rode across to the gate with a guard who'd patently gone to fetch him. There was an exchange of words and Jim turned and looked up at her window.

That was sufficient. Candace flew into her skirt and jacket, then tiptoed out, glad that Glory still slept.

Don had joined the group when she ran lightly across to them. Jim looked at her. "This is Anjou, from Blue Feather's teepee. She's sick and calling for you, Candace." He stood very still watching her.

Candace looked toward the stable, but Don grabbed her arm. "You can't go out there tonight. That's final." His voice rose a little. "Suppose she had something contagious? You might catch it and we couldn't leave. Damn it, let them go to their own medicine man."

Candace didn't speak.

"You said you were through with this pest-hole," Don rushed on. "Just as I am. Now, prove it."

The stockade was suddenly quiet.

"I have to go," Candace said finally. "I must. They trust me." She knew Don was terribly angry, but it couldn't be helped. She'd have to straighten it out with him when she returned. Have to try to make him understand.

"Well," he said bitterly. "I'll have to ride with you."

"No," Candace insisted. "They don't know you. They'd be afraid. Blue Feather's messenger can take me." And before Don could protest a guard brought her horse. She didn't stop to wonder about that. She nodded to the Indian and flung herself into the saddle. She raced out across the prairie and toward the distant teepee village.

Fleet though her horse was, another was fleeter. She heard the pound of hooves behind her coming closer and closer. It wasn't Don's horse. She'd recognize that sound. Then Jim's big bay pulled even with her, and the look in his eyes was something she'd remember all the rest of her life. She was grateful he'd come because she might not be able to cope with the situation alone.

ONLY A FEW fires burned in front of the dark teepees. Their arrival set up a braying of dogs, the pack pallmelling to meet them.

At Blue Feather's lodge, Candace slid off her horse and pushed anxiously inside. The fetid air made her gasp. She greeted the family and after proper formalities went quickly to the child's pallet. She dropped to her knees and felt her forehead. It was cool. There was certainly no fever and Candace breathed a sigh of relief.

Blue Feather's bead eyes watched her anxiously, her cheeks tear-stained. "What's the matter, honey?" Candace asked gently.

"I'm sick," she said. "With a great sickness here." And she held her hand over her heart. "I hurt."

Jim came to the entrance and Blue Feather smiled. "I told her," she said, "what you told me I could."

Candace whirled. "What is all this?" she demanded.

"Come outside and I'll explain. It really is serious though."

He took Candace's hand and led her to one of the fires where he could watch her. "She does hurt," he said soberly. "She's sick at heart that you're going away." Candace shook her completely dismayed head. "She told me when I rode her in yesterday," Jim went on, "and asked if she could tell you how she felt. She thought you were deserting her and her friends, but I explained that the school will con-

tinue." He smiled sadly. "That wasn't enough for Blue Feather. She wants you to take her East with you and I know it's hopeless."

Blue Feather came out then, timidly. She ran to Candace and buried her head against her waist. Candace drew her close. How could she take the child along? Don would never permit it. She patted her and told her to run back to bed that she'd see her tomorrow and to stop worrying. Candace promised she'd try to think of something. The shining faith in Blue Feather's eyes tore at Candace, then she trotted obediently back into the teepee.

Candace got up slowly and climbed back on her horse. They rode silently back toward the Fort. Then she pulled up and Jim stopped.

"Why didn't you tell me the truth at the Fort?" she demanded. "I thought she was really ill and Don's furious at me now."

Jim smiled. "Shall I tell you?" His eyes were bright. "I wanted to see what you'd do."

She spurred her horse. He'd been so sure. He'd even ordered her horse saddled.

Don was waiting for them. So was Glory who'd awakened and come down to see what the fuss was all about. Glory let out a little cry.

"How could you do such a thing to a person as wonderful as Don?" Glory demanded. "Go off that way to a filthy village. Don't come near me," she cried. "You've probably caught some dreadful disease."

Don said curtly, "Candace, you'd better scrub up. Did the Indian have an infection, do you think?"

CANDACE looked at him for a long time. "No," she said very slowly. "But I have. I guess I'm infected by the West and its problems. I'm sorry, darling, but it wouldn't have worked out for us. I'm afraid I'm a pioneer after all and not meant to return to civilization." Don started after her and Candace felt a little sad. "I'm too much of a hoodlum at heart." She glanced at Glory. "Don't you see, Don, Glory's the type you'd be happy with." And she smiled when she realized that Don would be able to hold Glory in line.

Glory ran to Don. "If this is pioneering I don't want it. Jim would make me nurse sick Indians at his awful trading post. Oh, Don, take me back to St. Louis with you," she begged.

Jim laughed and walked out of the room. Candace turned and followed blindly. He was standing at the open gates, staring through the brilliant moonlight across the prairie into the West. He didn't turn.

"You could take Blue Feather with you, you know," he said.

"I know," Candace said.

He turned then. And there was between them that which had disconcerted her from the start. That knowledgeableness in him of her—of the expectancy he raised and her dormant fires. Only now Candace read that awareness correctly. It hadn't been for all women. It had been just for her.

She went into his arms.

★

Coming Next Issue

THE BRIDE WORE SPURS

An Exciting Novelette

by Francis Flick

HE'D NEVER SETTLE DOWN

Jamie was a roving man, a trapper, and he liked living alone.

by Shelby Trent

THE OREGON sky was dark and threatening, overhead. As a long, yellow finger of lightning zigzagged across the gray sky, Thalia Bryant wrapped her heavy wool cloak tighter and shivered, but not from cold.

She stood under a towering pine—a small, slender girl with leaf-brown hair and eyes that held the golden glints of a sandy, quiet pool. There was a fragile, almost dresden-fine look about her.

She glanced up at the darkening sky. felt the first drops of rain spatter against her face and murmured.

"But I'm not afraid, no matter what happens."

She bent down and began gathering wood. The sounds of the evening camp drifted into her consciousness and she felt a heavy dread within.

A few months before, she and her brother had joined the wagon train to come to Oregon. Her fiancee, Neil Cramer had been with them, too. Now, Ben and Neil were both dead and the pioneers were saying that she had caused both their deaths.

Although Thalia knew she hadn't been responsible for their deaths, the knowledge that everyone blamed her was a burden not easily disposed of.

A twig snapped and she whirled. A stranger stood behind her. Tall and deeply tanned, his immense frame snugly filled out the soft, worn buckskins he wore.

"I'll help you. It's raining harder."

He spoke as though she had known him forever. She ran to her wagon with a load of wood, climbed in under the canvas and listened to the pattering of the rain.

Campfires sizzled and threatened to go out. People dashed through the soft earth, churning it into mud, as the pioneers erected canvas shelters to cover the fires. Mothers called for children to come in out of the rain, and babies cried.

The stranger dumped a load of wood under the wagon and climbed up beside Thalia.

"I'll build up your fire if you'll let me have some canvas to shelter it with," he said. "And my name's Dan Trail."

"I'm Thalia Bryant, and you're very kind, Mister Trail." She smiled at him and the brook-brown eyes laughed for the first time in weeks.

He went about fixing the campfire in a calm, unhurried manner. Thalia washed potatoes for roasting, took a cleaned rabbit out of salted water, and put a pot with the last of the coffee in it on the fire to boil. Dan Trail fixed an improvised spit for the rabbit to turn on and came back beside Thalia in the wagon.

"Rain's slacked down a lot. It's just a drizzle, now. You're mighty lucky, you know, to be getting to Oregon in early summer. You can have a garden and get your cabin built before winter sets in. Where's your menfolk?"

"I have no one except myself." Thalia took off her heavy muddy shoes and tucked her stockinged feet under her full skirt.

"My brother Ben and I started out

"I'm a roving one . . . Forget I kissed you!"

here together, and with my fiancee, Neil Cramer. We were only a week out and they were both murdered."

"Would you feel like telling me about it?" Thalia stared at the big man. Strangely, she felt drawn to him in some sort of invisible kinship.

"I'll tell you, but first, tell me—who are you, Dan Trail, and why did you come here to our wagon-train? You're not a settler."

"I'VE BEEN here ten years," he said slowly, and smiled. "I grew up in a cabin in Kentucky. There were too many of us young'uns to feed, and my Pa was too lazy. Ma was just plain wore out. So, I took my gun and my dog and joined up with a bunch that were going out West. By the time the Indians got through with us, we were a sorry looking outfit, but we were all glad for the new land to live on. I took up hunting and trapping for my work, instead of farming. Can't see any use in a man's settling down in a cabin and looking at the same sunrise and sunset. I was hired by your trail-guide, Jeff McLaughlin, to help you folks get across Devil's Rapids. Then you'll be close enough to Fort Bannock that you can begin building your cabins and such."

"You don't speak like an uneducated man." Thalia didn't realize she had spoken her thoughts.

"We've got long cold winters here, Ma'am and I always do a lot of reading. I almost had to teach myself, since I didn't have much chance for schooling. Now you know my life story, how about yours?"

Thalia had sat motionless while she listened to him; now she slid her feet back into her shoes and jumped down out of the wagon. The coffee-pot threatened to boil over. She started to lift it from the fire but it tipped over and a liquid stream of fire ran across her wrist. She whimpered with pain as she set the pot in a cooler place and climbed back into the wagon.

Dan was beside her at once. He took the clean cloth from her as she lifted it from a chest, spread salve on her wrist and bandaged it carefully. He looked down at her steadily and she.

saw that his eyes were the gray of the thunderclouds in the sky that afternoon. His nose was slightly crooked and she guessed that it had been broken once. His mouth was wide and generous, tilted pleasantly at the corners.

Thalia's eyes widened as he bent his head and kissed her tenderly. His hand slipped from her bandaged wrist and held her firmly against him. Somehow, her arms were around him, his long, blond hair was crisp and alive against her fingers.

She forgot that this man was almost a stranger, and kissed him back blindly, letting her lips soften and cling to his.

He did not hold her in his arms long. She swayed as he abruptly released her and then, remembering, she felt the blood rush hotly to her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am. I didn't mean to offend you like that but you looked so little and sweet and I—" He broke off and strode to the opening at the end of the wagon.

"Don't blame yourself too much. I've —I've been lonely for a long time and I won't pretend. I liked kissing you."

He turned and said almost rudely, "You don't want to like to kiss me. I told you Ma'am—I don't like to see the sunrise and sunset from the same place every day. I'm a roving man—a trapper and I like living alone. Forget I kissed you."

Thalia felt the blood searing her cheeks again.

"Yes, I'll forget you kissed me, Dan Trail."

SHE SAT in the wagon seat and gazed at the rapidly clearing sky. *How can I forget you and your kiss, Dan Trail?* she thought.

"Tell me about yourself, Thalia," Dan said gently, as though to erase the minutes between his story and now.

"My father always wanted to come to Oregon. He was a schoolteacher in a small Kansas town. He kept telling my brother, Ben and I that even if he died before we got to come to Oregon, he wanted us to go alone. He died of pneumonia last winter. Ben and I—and Neil joined this wagon train and started out here. We had been on the trail for almost a week and we went through a town—I think they called it 'Red Gulch'. The first night we were there, Ben and Neil got in a poker-game with some card-sharks at the *Black Diamond Cafe*. They discovered they were being cheated and accused the men. They were both shot down without a chance!"

Her voice broke and tears glinted in her eyes, but she continued.

"Everyone in the wagon train said it was me with my high-faluting airs that made them go and gamble to try and get more money. They say I wasn't satisfied with Neil as he was, but it isn't true! He was everything I—!"

She stopped, unable to continue. Dan Trail moved closer, and put a big arm protectively around her slender shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Thalia. It's hard to lose someone you love, I know. I went home two years ago and found out my Ma had died the month before. Jamie, my younger brother came back with me. He's my trapping partner in the winter. Summertimes, he loafs around Fort Bannock and spends the money he makes during the winter."

Thalia slipped from the circle of his big arm and jumped to the ground. She shook her linsey-woolsey skirt and smiled up at him.

"You're very kind, Mister Trail, but I don't think you had better put your arm around me, even in sympathy. The people in this wagon train think I'm a wicked woman, anyway. You don't want to be burned at a stake, do you?"

He jumped down and stretched a little, tightening the buckskin across his wide shoulders.

"When my brother Jamie gets here in the morning, there won't be a single woman here, old or young, that'll have

time to be jealous of me putting an arm around you."

They sat close to the campfire and Thalia insisted on sharing her supper with him, saying that she could never finish it all alone.

"Just what sort of person is your brother?" she finally asked.

"Jamie? Well, he's almost the same size as me, but he's still growing. He's dark though, like Pa, with hair as black as a crow's wing and bold, black eyes. Right good-looking cuss Jamie is. He loves pretty girls and they love him. He could charm a rattlesnake right out of its skin, but he'd probably take the skin to Fort Bannock and sell it."

"He sounds interesting," Thalia murmured.

Dan stared at her a long moment. She lowered her lashes and sipped her black coffee demurely.

"Aw, you don't want to get mixed up with him, Ma'am. He couldn't settle down any more than I could— Jamie won't ever settle down."

"Let me be the judge of that." Thalia stood up straight and proud. "I pick my own friends—and sweethearts. Goodnight, Mister Tail." She turned and walked to her wagon, very stiffly.

Once inside, she wearily climbed into her bedding, but sleep would not come. Thalia lay awake a long time, thinking of the tall, blond man who had kissed her and then warned her to forget it. He was a rambling man, that Dan Trail, but the woman who trapped his heart would be very fortunate—and terribly happy. Finally, she drifted off into a troubled sleep, only to dream of Dan Trail and his haunting kiss.

SHE AWOKE at dawn. The camp was already stirring. Dressing hurriedly, Thalia picked up the nearly empty water-bucket and walked to the nearby spring. She filled the bucket, then moved a little further down to a small, clear pool. Staring at the unruffled water, she saw her reflection mirrored on its surface. How thin she was! Her eyes and mouth looked enormous. For an instant, she stared at her reflection, then she dipped her hands into the icy water and splashed it on her face, neck and arms.

She slipped off the worn Indian moccasins Neil had given her long ago, and paddled her slender feet in the water, feeling lighthearted and almost happy. Drying her feet with a fold of her skirt, she suddenly had the feeling that something—someone was watching her. She whirled, her hand going sharply to her mouth, and gasped. Behind her, leaning on his rifle, stood a lean, tall stranger clad in buckskins. She had only to glance at his jet-black wavy hair and black laughing eyes, then the word came from her lips in almost a whisper:

"Jamie!"

"Howdy, Pretty-Gal. Dan told me about you." His voice was a trifle deeper than Dan's and rich with musical laughter. He laid down his rifle and walked toward her, gracefully as a panther.

"Let me help with them moccasins."

She thrust out her bare feet and he slid them on, then taking her fingers in his strong ones, he lifted her to her feet.

"Better hurry and get back to camp. McLaughlin's almost ready to start across the rapids."

Thalia followed him as he carried the water-bucket back to her wagon, her thoughts in a helpless whirl.

They found the men in a group; Jeff McLaughlin giving them last minute orders.

Thalia smiled sweetly at Dan, noting with relish the look of annoyance that clouded his eyes.

Jamie set the bucket of water down on the ground and his teeth flashed in an engaging grin as he seized Thalia around her waist and swung her into the wagon-seat with as much ease as though she were a child.

"You can drive down the trail to the

river-bank, then Dan and I'll take over." He turned and strode away.

Thalia watched him go, with widened eyes. What a sleek, well-fed, graceful young animal he was! In his way, he seemed as open and honest as Dan, yet she was sure Jamie must have broken several hearts, already.

She drove her wagon down to the riverside and sat silently waiting for some sign from Jamie. The river boiled angrily over snags and rocks.

THALIA watched with dismay as the men began driving the lead wagon down to the water's edge.

The horses plunged valiantly into the water and the wagon rocked crazily behind, tipping first to one side, then another. After what seemed hours, it righted itself and swayed with the current. The horses' heads were barely above water as they fought the surging current with every fibre of their bodies.

Jamie came bounding up to Thalia and smiled lazily through thick lashes.

"Reckon you'll be just about the last wagon to cross. Dan wants to escort you across properly."

"Tell Mister Dan Trail that I thank him for his kind offer, but I'd rather *you* did—that is, if you don't mind."

Jamie caught her hand and held it for an instant.

"I'd be right happy to, Pretty Gal. It's going to rain in bucketfuls any minute now, so we're going to have to hurry this up a bit. You and I might get washed down the river if we don't."

He left her and walked back to Dan and Jeff McLaughlin.

The first wagon had reached the opposite bank safely and another had started out. Thalia gave a silent thanks that the river wasn't so very wide.

The first raindrop startled her. The second caused panic to race through her body. Suppose it should rain hard! In a matter of minutes the river would be swollen and raging. She might have to camp on the bank for days before she could cross, and she might have to cross it alone!

The men were working feverishly now, sending one wagon after another. And the rain had begun in earnest. It was no longer a spring shower. It was a deluge.

Dan came striding over to her wagon, his hair plastered wetly to his finely molded head.

"Get inside! I'm going to take you across."

"No!" Thalia's eyes flashed angrily. "Jamie will take me across!"

"This is no time to argue. When we get to the other side, you and Jamie can get married for all I care, but I'm taking this wagon across, now."

"No, brother. I can handle this wagon all right. You tend to another one."

Jamie stood behind Dan, smiling a little, rocking lightly on the balls of his feet. Thalia saw his fists clench and unclench slightly.

Dan looked at Jamie one long minute, then turned and his eyes locked with Thalia's. For one eternity they stared at each other. Thalia felt held and carressed and kissed by that look. With a supreme effort, she willed her own eyes to look away. In a strange, tight voice she said.

"Please go, Dan. You'll not fight with Jamie, today."

"No." Dan's voice was barely above a whisper. "I'll not fight Jamie today. Not over a woman." He smiled tight-lipped and walked rapidly to another wagon and climbed into the driver's seat.

Jamie swung lightly up beside Thalia and shook the water from his eyes like a puppy.

Thalia tried to quell her rising panic and stared hard at him, noticing the breadth of his shoulders, the soft easy manner with which he urged the horses to the water's edge. She saw that the last wagon had crossed the rapids and Dan had leaped to the ground.

Impulsively, she grasped Jamie's

arm and clung to it tightly as fear roared within her. With a gasp, she realized that the roar was not imagination. It was real! She screamed as she watched the foaming brown cloud of water bearing down on them. With a horrible fascination, Thalia felt other screams try to force their way from her tightly constricted throat and fail. Jamie was trying desperately to turn the horses back but his efforts were futile. The icy brown monster bore down them, and engulfed the wagon and horses. Thalia felt the wetness that threatened to drown her and clung desperately to Jamie's arm. There was a sharp blow at the base of her skull, and the merciful blackness swallowed her.

BRIGHTLY colored lights wavered and disappeared before Thalia's closed eyelids. She felt like a sodden mass of pain and somewhere, far away, she heard a voice calling her name. With a great effort, she tried to raise her eyelids, but they were so heavy and she was exhausted! She lay still, seeing and feeling the colored lights, then again, she heard the voice. This time she managed to open her eyes. The world seemed to reel, but she steadied herself and looked around.

She was lying in the mud at the river's edge. Jamie lay a few feet away, his left leg oddly twisted and his face white with pain. He caught her glance and managed to smile encouragingly.

"You sure had me worried, Pretty-Gal. Thought that log that whacked you on the head had killed you. I think I've got a busted leg or something. You feel all right?"

Thalia nodded and got unsteadily to her feet. She knelt beside Jamie and took the knife he unsheathed and offered her, then she began cutting away the wet buckskin. His leg was swollen and dark, and Thalia felt the bone grate everytime she accidently moved the leg. Jamie bit his lips until tiny drops of blood oozed out.

"Wagon washed up on the bank?" she asked softly. He nodded silently and pointed upstream. Thalia choked back a cry as she saw that one of her horses lay cold and stiff, but still in the traces. Another horse grazed nearby, his harness hanging in tatters. She got to her feet and walked over to the wagon. After a minutes rummaging, she found several small pieces of wood that would do for splints. She climbed into the wagon, torn between dismay and relief at the sight of the wreckage. Boxes and bundles had burst open and were soaked through.

Thalia paused long enough to collect a fairly dry petticoat which she tore into strips, then she climbed out and hurried back to Jamie.

His eyes were closed and he seemed to be sleeping but at her first touch, he opened them wide and reaching out, pulled her roughly to him.

"Do a good job, Pretty-Gal. And don't mind if I holler a little. I wouldn't be much of a man if I didn't have my two legs to stand on."

Thalia tried to smile, and felt the weak, silly tears slide down her cheeks.

"I helped my Dad set a colt's leg once. It knitted so well, he won a race at the county fair."

"Well, if you could do a good job on a frail little thing like a horse, I reckon I'll pull through. I'm half bear and one-quarter wild-cat, anyhow."

In spite of herself, Thalia laughed aloud. She bent her head, and Jamie's lips met hers eagerly and sweetly. Thalia saw colored lights beneath her eyelids once more, but the pain was replaced by a bitter-sweet ache through her body, as the memory of Dan Trail sent the sweetness crashing around her. She pulled herself gently out of Jamie's arms and said briskly, "I don't care how much you holler, Mister Half-Bear, just don't kick!"

WORKING grimly, she managed to set the bone to her satisfaction and although Jamie gasped audi-

bly once or twice, he kept a twisted grin on his mouth and his dark eyes danced. When the last bandage was tied around the splints, Thalia picked up the battered water-bucket she had brought from the wagon and venturing to the swollen river's edge, managed to fill the bucket with water. Jamie drank greedily, then he lay down again and closed his eyes.

"If you'll find a little pine-pitch and some pine fuzz, I'll build us up a fire. And if you'll find me a sturdy pole, I'll whittle me out a fancy crutch so's I can hop around a little."

Thalia found some pitch and pine-fuzz that seemed fairly dry and dumped a skirt-full of kindling by Jamie. While he coaxed a small fire from the damp wood, she found potatoes and some tea and cornmeal in the wagon. The cornmeal was soggy, but she decided it would do for some sort of bread to eat with their potatoes.

After their meager supper, Jamie whittled out a crude crutch and with a little help from Thalia, managed to hobble a few steps before he collapsed.

Thalia rigged an improvised shelter of poles and the tattered remnants of the canvas from the wagon. Some of the bedding she had hung near the fire, and it was warm and dry. She fixed a bed for Jamie, and found to her dismay that there was one thin blanket left. Wrapping the blanket around her shoulders, she huddled near the fire.

Darkness descended swiftly and Thalia realized that she had been unconscious for several hours that afternoon.

Jamie's low voice brought her out of her reverie.

"Are you thinking about Dan, Thalia?" She turned quickly, a little startled, and smiled warmly at him.

"Yes, I suppose he must be very worried about you, Jamie. He probably thinks we're both dead."

"I reckon he's just as worried about you as he is me. Dan's in love with you, Thalia. I always knew it would hit him like lightning. I'd bet this winter's whole fur catch he's ready to settle down and stay in the same place for the rest of his life. I feel the same way too, Pretty-Gal. I've been struck as hard as Dan has." He gazed at her intently and Thalia saw that his eyes no longer sparkled with devilry.

She lowered her head and closed her eyes. She believed him! The thought that he was in love with her was comforting, but to think that Dan might love her! That was sparkling wine—a bright flame—that was everything. Jamie continued in the same quiet voice, devoid of laughter.

"I'm not bragging or anything, but I've always had my way with any woman that I took a fancy to. I guess it kind of swelled my head, all the attention I used to get, but that was before I met you. After we get out of this mess, I'd like the chance to court you proper-like—if you'll let me."

Thalia raised her head and smiled at Jamie fondly.

"I'm not the girl for you, Jamie. You'd never really get to know me. With Dan, it's already there—the knowledge of each other. I can't even hope that he'll love me enough to settle down; all I can do is wait."

"Well, anyway, I spoke my piece and you know how I feel. If you change your mind, I'll be waiting."

She went swiftly to his side and knelt by him. He took her hand in his big, warm one and pressed it reassuringly.

"Thank you so much, Jamie," she whispered. "Goodnight."

He smiled, but his dark eyes were still without laughter.

THALIA killed a rabbit the next day and they made a tasty and filling stew from it. She and Jamie worked continuously from daylight until long after dark, improving their shelter and drying out everything that had survived the wreckage. They man-

aged to drag the dead horse into the forest, although the live one was terrified upon being hitched to his dead companion.

Another day passed, and another. Between herself and Jamie, Thalia experienced a new kind of feeling. It must be the position we're in. She thought. I feel almost married to him. When I see Dan, everything will change and I'll forget all about Jamie.

Whatever he thought, Jamie kept to himself. He was gay and cheerful, with a never-ending store of funny little jokes and rich ballads that he sang loudly in his pleasant baritone.

As Thalia walked toward the river, now, Jamie chopped at a sapling with his hatchet held in one hand while he balanced himself dexterously on his crutch. His voice rang out,

"My true love is a brown-eyed daisy,
hoe dee-ing—di diddy-I-day;
If I don't get her, I'll go crazy—"

"Haven't you mixed up the color of your daisies?" Thalia called back to him as she sat down on the river-bank.

"NO!" he shouted. Dropping his hatchet, he limped toward her.

She felt her hands tremble as she tossed her fishing-line into the muddy but now quiet river.

Jamie stretched his lean frame on the mossy river-bank and gazed at her.

"No more blue-eyed daisies for me!" he declared vehemently. Then softly, he added, "I love you so very much."

"NO!" Thalia's voice quavered. "You don't love me and I don't love you. Now go away before you frighten off the fish!"

He reached for her leisurely, his mouth serious. Thalia clutched frantically at the fishing-line, her eyes wide and frightened.

"No, Jamie, no—please!"

His lips were hungry and urgent against her own. She felt her lips soften and cling as her arms went around him. Fiercely she clung to him, and felt warmth and sweetness steal through her.

How long they kissed, Thalia had no idea. When she opened her eyes, Jamie looked at her unsmilingly and said.

"You couldn't have kissed me back like that if you hadn't meant it."

Thalia covered her face with her hands and wept softly.

The sharp snap of a twig made her start abruptly and through tear-blurred eyes, she saw Dan's tall figure only a few feet behind Jamie. She gasped softly and wiped her eyes vigorously.

Dan's voice was rough when he finally spoke.

"This is what I thought I'd find if you were both all right. Thalia, if he's hurt you—I'll kill him!"

Jamie got slowly to his feet, and leaning on his crutch, faced his brother.

"I've not harmed a hair on her head. All I've done is told her that I love her."

"You told Thalia you're in love with her?" Dan's voice held incredulity.

"And how many other women have you told that to, just to turn their heads. I ought to beat you half to death!"

"She's the only woman I've ever said that to," Jamie said calmly. "And the only one I've ever loved. I'll fight you if you want me to, but there's no need of it. She happens to be in love with you, Dan. You could see it, if you weren't so blind."

DAN STARED at Jamie a minute longer, his face impassive, then he went to Thalia's side and lifted her up. His cloudy gray eyes were thunder-darkened and his mouth grim as he said quietly,

"Are you all right, Thalia, and is what Jamie said really true—that you do love me?"

She tried to smile through her tears and say that she loved him but found to her dismay that she could not. The tears cascaded on her cheeks again

and she hated herself for being weak and tearful when she had always been so strong.

Pulling away, Thalia threw herself down on the ground and dug her fists into her eyes.

"Go away and leave me, both of you! I'm not a bone to be quarreled over. I don't know what I want or who I want!"

For a long moment, the silence was broken only by her sobs, then Dan spoke.

"I'll help you get back across the river, Thalia. No matter how you feel about me, I want to help you all I can."

Thalia clutched at a clump of grass and kept her eyes tightly shut. She heard his soft footsteps as he walked away, and felt wonder in her heart as she compared the two brothers and found that both had the same qualities she had sought and yearned for these past barren months.

Jamie moved closer and leaning over, brushed his lips across her hair.

"Get up and dry your eyes, Honey. You shouldn't worry about anything—least of all which of us you choose. You might find out that you didn't want either Dan or me, when you get to Fort Bannock. There are a lot of men, there, any kind you might want.

"Thalia—if—just if you do decide on Dan, I promise you I'll be a good loser. But if you can ever say that you love me, then I'll be the luckiest man in the world."

Gently, he lifted her up and smiled crookedly at her. Thalia smudged the tears with the back of her hand, and tried to smile.

"I've been a baby, Jamie. Please forgive me for being so foolish. It's just that I was so happy with you and then Dan came, and now, I'm the most miserable person on earth!"

He nodded. "I know. But you don't have to be. When the time comes, you'll know whether or not you love one of us, and I reckon you'll say it when you feel it, and not before."

Thalia busied herself with the task of gathering up all the things she had managed to salvage from the wreck. Dan and Jamie were busily constructing a raft with which to float everything across the river.

The ring of their axes broke the solemn stillness of the forest and surprisingly, their pleasing voices rang out from time to time in song.

AFTER THE completion of the raft, they sat around the campfire and ate their supper in silence. Thalia glanced now and then from one to the other; to Dan's fair ruggedness, then to Jamie's darkly handsome face and equally sturdy frame. It was impossible for her to choose, just yet!

Finally, she could stand the silence no longer.

"If you both will excuse me, I think I'll go to bed."

Dan's face was unreadable as he nodded silently.

Jamie grinned his familiar grin and said cheerfully,

"Goodnight, Pretty-Gal."

With fury in his eyes, Dan turned to him.

"Thalia isn't a dance-hall girl like the ones you usually talk to. You can call her by her proper name."

Thalia felt blood surge to her throat and cheeks. Her eyes were very bright as she smiled down at Jamie.

"I like to be called "Pretty-Gal", Jamie. I'm not made entirely of ice, and any woman likes to be complimented, once in a while. Call me that as often as you like."

She leaned over and kissed Jamie full on the lips, but his remained passive beneath hers. She smiled at him again, and felt a bitter ache of disappointment blaze through her being, as he looked at her reproachfully. To hide the hurt, she turned to Dan and smiled coolly at him.

"You might try being a little more like Jamie too, Dan."

Dan's face went white and he glared first at Jamie, then at her. Thalia lifted her skirts and walked swiftly to her bed of evergreen boughs and blankets. She lay quietly, trying to fathom the sudden change in Jamie, and her own swift hurt when he had sat stiff and unyielding. Dan's fury at both her and Jamie, and his coldness, she dismissed. It was unimportant, now. But this new Jamie! As Thalia watched the silent figures sitting by the dying fire, she realized that without Jamie's warmth and laughter, there would be no happiness for her. Suddenly, she felt a little awed and shaken by the impact of this new knowledge.

NEXT MORNING, they crossed the river. The trip was a pleasant one. Everything that had been salvaged from the wrecked wagon was loaded on the raft, and after two trips, all Thalia's belongings had been deposited on the Fort Bannock side of the river. The horse swam easily across, and cropped peacefully on the river-bank.

Thalia at last, sighed with relief, then asked Dan,

"I'm very grateful to you for getting us across, but now, how do we get to Fort Bannock? Jamie could never walk that far, and we need a wagon."

For an instant, some of the warmth returned to Dan's voice as he smiled down at her.

"I'll take the horse and go to Fort Bannock for a wagon. You won't have anything to be afraid of and I should be back sometime tonight." He walked over to Jamie and placed his hand on Jamie's shoulder in an awkward show of affection.

"Take good care of yourself and Thalia, Jamie. I'll get back as soon as I can."

"I know you will, Dan. Don't worry about us." Jamie's lips smiled, but his eyes were grave.

Jamie leaned on his crutch and Thalia sat down on a bundle of bedding as they silently watched Dan ride away. Then, after a long moment, Jamie spoke.

"He's a mighty big man, Thalia. In more ways than one."

"Yes." She slumped wearily. "I suppose all we can do now, is wait."

When Dan returned late that night, he not only had a wagon, but another horse, as well. He and Thalia loaded the wagon and as the first light of dawn dispelled the blackness, they began a slow pace along the river.

By noon, they came to a clearing and directly ahead, Thalia saw the log walls of the Fort.

Dan stopped in front of a small cabin, a short distance from the Fort and Thalia stared in surprise.

"Does this cabin belong to a friend of yours?"

He shook his head. "This is our cabin, Jamie's and mine. We built it a year ago, but we've never stayed in it for long. Sometimes Jamie comes over and stays a day or two. We talked it over last night and decided to let you have the cabin for as long as you want it. There's a good-sized piece of land to go with it."

"Jamie will bunk in the lean-to in back, in case of trouble. I've got to start on a trip this afternoon, and catch up with Jeff McLaughlin and a bunch going on to the Willamette Valley."

"But—" the words of protest died on Thalia's lips.

"Thank you Dan, for everything you've done for me. When will you be back?"

"There's not much telling. It depends on what kind of job I get after this one."

Thalia felt shut out by the terseness of his words. She glanced helplessly at him, then straightened her shoulders and walked into the cabin. It was rather bare, and a blanket of dust lay over everything, but the cabin itself was roomy and sturdily built. The clipped,

measured tones of Dan's voice still rang in her ears, but she forced herself to concentrate on the cabin and the tasks she knew lay ahead.

THE DOOR banged and Dan strode in, carrying a small chest. Thalia, startled from her reverie, went outside. Working hurriedly, Dan unloaded the wagon, and unhitched Thalia's horse. The other horse, he explained, he had borrowed, but the wagon was hers, now. His goodbye to them both was brief.

"Take care of yourselves. Jamie, you help Thalia get acquainted with the people here, and be good to her. Thalia, remember what I told you the first night I saw you? I'm still the same. I like to see what lies yonder on the other side of the hill. I was wrong about Jamie, though. With the right woman to love, he'll be able to settle down. Just remember that."

He left then, and Thalia felt an odd lump in her throat. Turning to Jamie, she spoke huskily.

"Does he really mean what he says, Jamie, or is it just his way of making us feel free to love each other?"

Jamie moved close to Thalia and looked down at her.

"I wish I knew, but I don't. I do know this, though—you're in love with me. You've just admitted it."

She lowered her gaze. "I know, Jamie but somehow, Dan's still in our way; he's between us and we can't ignore that. Does he really love me? If he does, it was my fault, because I threw myself at him the first time I saw him."

"You did not!" Jamie said fiercely, putting an arm around her protectively. "You were lonely and Dan was the first person since—since your brother and fiancee, to show a little kindness toward you. It was only natural, but it wasn't love. Thalia, honey, when you admit that, then there shouldn't be anything in our way. Let's go into Fort Bannock and be married today—now!"

Thalia wrenched away from him and stood white and trembling. Her voice shook with sobs but she managed to control it.

"I can't. Don't you see, Jamie, if I've hurt Dan I have to make things right with him before I can marry you."

"Well, you wouldn't marry him just to make things right, would you." Jamie's dark brows drew together in a frown.

"Would you cheat both Dan and me *and* yourself out of happiness? Thalia, we love each other! Nothing should stand between us. Not if you really love me."

"Oh, I do, Jamie, I do!" Thalia cried. "But please Jamie, be patient with me and wait a little while. Just a little while!"

She touched Jamie's shoulder timidly. He bent down and kissed her swiftly on the mouth.

"If I don't get my brown-eyed daisy, I'll sure enough go crazy!" he declared. His black eyes were dancing now.

"Just knowing that you love me is wonderful. I think I could throw this old crutch plumb away, right now."

"Oh, don't!" Thalia laughed, playfully tugging a lock of his hair. Still holding to it, she pulled his head back down and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "Come inside and boss me while I set the cabin to rights."

Arms around each other, and hearts considerably lighter than ever before, they went into the cabin.

THALIA loved the little cabin, and within a week, it was clean and shining, with gay curtains and bright bouquets of wild flowers. Jamie stayed close by at night, and it was comforting and reassuring to know that he was outside in the lean-to. One bright morning, Thalia went to the Fort, and found to her delight that the

townspeople were building a grade-school and were desperately in need of a teacher. She talked to the school-board and they were unanimous in their decision to hire her.

Once outside the Fort, Thalia raced toward the cabin.

Jamie was sitting on the doorstep, making a footstool.

"What's the matter, Honey? You act like a whole tribe of Indians was after you." He grinned.

"Oh, Jamie, I've been hired to teach the children in the new school, this fall! Isn't it wonderful? I can make enough money to replace everything I lost in the river."

"Well, that's right fine, Pretty-Gal, but were you intending to be an old maid school-teacher, or Mrs. Jamie Trail?"

"Only an old-maid school-teacher for this one school term, Jamie," Thalia laughed. Then, "What's that sticking out of your shirt, a letter?"

As he handed it to her, Jamie laughed. "I've got news for you, Pretty-Gal, you may be a school-teacher, but you won't be an old-maid by this fall. Now, read what brother Dan just went and did."

Thalia's hands trembled as she unfolded the soiled piece of paper, and read, *"Dear Jamie and Thalia, I won't be coming back like a planned for I just got married, today. Her name is Susan and she was with Jeff McLaughlin's wagon train. Her Dad is with her and we're all three planning on going to California to do a little prospecting for gold. She's the most wonderful woman I've ever known, but then, Thalia is next best and I hope by now you two are happily married. I'll send you an address just as soon as we get one. Dan."*

Silently, Thalia handed Jamie the letter. "I'm so happy for Dan," she said softly. "He'll never have to see the sunset from the same place each day."

Jamie took her hand and pulled her down on the step, holding her closely.

"I'm even happier for us. See the sun setting behind the hills? As long as I've got my Pretty-Gal to share this with me, I'm satisfied right here."

He bent his dark head and kissed her hungrily, yet tenderly. Thalia drew back and looked into his eyes. They were dancing with the old gay lights, and his generous mouth was smiling again.

"I'll never want to ramble any further, either, Jamie, only—do you think the minister would marry us right now?"

Jamie laughed. "Reckon so, Pretty-Gal, right after—this." He bent his head and kissed her again.

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A DUEL FOR DOLLY

by
Tod Harding

No matter what the outward occasion was, Dolly knew that Jim Canaris was fighting a duel over her. And Canaris meant to kill his man...

THE WORST thing about it was that Mike wasn't worried. He came into Dolly Harmon's restaurant that morning as if nothing had happened, and she could see that he probably wasn't even going to mention the events of the night before.

She set a cup of coffee before him, and said, "Michael Sherred, are you going to throw your life away in a silly duel?"

He looked at her in that innocent expression that could either make her melt or explode, all depending on the occasion. "Why, honey," he protested, "it ain't as bad as all that. This doesn't call for a killing; Canaris and me'll just trade shots, and that'll satisfy his sense of honor."

Dolly shook her head. "No, Mike, you're all wrong there. I've heard a great deal about Jim Canaris. He's polite on the surface, and he talks in a soft voice, but he's ruthless underneath. He's killed men in duels before."

"Well...they were probably serious matters. All I did is splash a little whiskey on him..."

"You made him look ridiculous, Mike—right in front of everyone in the saloon. And then you laughed."

"So did everybody else," he protested. "Just a little splash on his fancy jacket, but Canaris looked like a wet hen; shucks, if he'd just passed it off, I'd have apologized real handsome and maybe bought him a drink—and nobody would have thought anything of it."

Dolly looked out the window thoughtfully. "Of course, Mike, you could *still* apologize..."

Sherred's jaw set, and she saw she'd said the wrong thing. He shook his head. "I ain't going to do anything of the kind. Not now; they'll all be saying I'm afraid of meeting him, and that's something a man can't live down."

"You'd rather be shot down, is that it?" There was a tremble in her voice, and Mike reached out across the counter and cupped her chin in his hand.

"For gosh sakes, honey, don't start carrying on like one of these Eastern women. You've never been afraid to see men fight for their rights before. Would you want to marry a man who had the reputation of a coward?"

Dolly twisted away angrily. "No... I'm not soft that way. Dad fought against the big cowmen in his time, and I know a man has to uphold his reputation, and take risks. But there's such a thing as an issue being too absurd to kill or get killed over."

Mike slapped a palm down on the counter like a pistol shot. "What keeps

you talking as if I'm going to get killed? Think I haven't faced guns before, or don't know how to handle one? I've got a good draw..."

"Canaris is faster..." she started.

"What makes you think so?"

She sighed. It was no use going into it; she knew now that she had played a part in the buildup to all this. It would do no good to tell Mike that Jim Canaris had shot a rattlesnake one afternoon when she was out riding with him and that his gunspeed had been nearly unbelievable—particularly for so slight a man. She knew that Canaris' short stature was one of the reasons why he went around with a chip on his shoulder; the little gambler was honest and likeable enough, but unbearably touchy. *And he can't stand being crossed by a tall man,* she thought.

Dolly looked up as Lafe Rubens came in, and winced at the "I told you so" expression on his face. Old Lafe had warned her about letting Canaris show any special attention to her—particularly when she'd as good as made up her mind about marrying Mike Sherred. He came in and took a seat next to the young rancher.

"Looks like Funeral Travis is going to have some business tomorrow," he said bluntly.

Mike's eyes narrowed. "Look," he said; "I said it before, and I'll say it to you. This doesn't call for a killing, and I don't aim to kill Canaris."

"Then the funeral will be yours," Lafe declared, "because he sure means to kill you." He lifted a hand as Dolly started to talk. "I've been around," he went on; "I've seen this fellow Canaris before—down in New Orleans, it was. He's fought a lot of duels and killed his man every time. He can handle a sixgun as well as those fancy dueling pistols and he's an expert fencer." He shook his head. "The only advantage you've got is that you have the choice of locale and weapons; you can pick whatever implement of death you think you're best at."

Dolly stared. "You mean, this is going to be one of those fancy duels, with seconds and everything?"

Lafe nodded. "Yep. Jim's picked Tolliver for his second, and Mike will have to pick a second of his own to take a message saying where the fight'll take place and what the weapons'll be. Doc Peters will be there, and I guess as many witnesses as want to look on. They usually don't make things so public, but Canaris wants everyone to see him restore his honor."

Mike shrugged. "I'm still not scared. Want to be my second, Lafe?"

Rubens sighed. "All right. It'll go

like this. I'll take your message over to Tolliver tonight. Then we hold the duel tomorrow; might as well get it over with before he starts passing the rumor around that you're afraid. He won't make any slurs about you before tonight, because by his code you've got that much time to make up your mind about how you want to meet him.

"We get together—say tomorrow morning—and me and Tolliver go over the rules and see if he'll accept any apology or any other form of satisfaction—he won't of course. Then we make sure that the weapons are in order and that it's carried out according to agreement."

Dolly said, "And Mike can choose any weapon he likes?"

Lafe nodded. "So long as it's lethal."

"And pick any place he likes?"

Rubens nodded.

"What if Jim decided not to fight after all?"

"Well, gal, Canaris can't now—not and hold his head up around here. He could be magnanimous and accept an apology if Mike crawfishes to him, but otherwise he'll go through with it. And, like I said, Canaris always kills his man."

* * *

IT WAS HARD not to burst out laughing at the expression on Mike's face as he sat up suddenly; he looked so funny. Then Dolly felt a remorse at the groan that escaped from him. "O-o-o-h...my head. ...What hit me? Where am I... What...?"

Instantly she was kneeling beside the couch. "Shh, honey; it's all right. You...you were just unconscious for a little while. It's—it's all my fault, too," she added with just the right amount of contrition.

"What's your fault? All I remember is having supper at the restaurant and starting out...got to give Lafe my message to Tolliver..." He started to sit up again. "Hey, what time is it? Lafe has to go over to the saloon and tell Tolliver..."

He groaned again and leaned back against the pillows. "What hit me?"

"Oh, darling," she said, "it's all my fault. That iron pot I had hanging over the door...the nail was loose and I was so worried about your duel I forgot to fix it. It fell on your poor head..."

Mike felt the bump on his skull and winced. Dolly made soothing noises, then a knock came at the door. She got up and flew toward it, opened it to admit Lafe Rubens.

The old man's face was convulsed with laughter, and his step was none too steady. He looked at Mike, then started to laugh again. "It worked!" he chortled. "It worked like a charm. Tolliver turned white as a sheet; then he started to sputter. But I wouldn't budge an inch. 'Them's my princpal's terms', I told him with as straight a face as I ever pulled. I turned my back on him and marched up to the bar, keeping a weather eye on him in the mirror, when he went over to Canaris."

"What did Jim do?" Dolly asked.

"Well, looked flustered, too; then he sort of got control of himself and dealt a few more hands. Then, polite as you choose, he says he's closing the table for the night, pays out his winnings and goes upstairs. I waited for a spell, then went out to the back where I could watch the door without being seen. Sure enough, a little while later, down comes Mr. Jim Canaris with a carpetbag in one hand and his travelling clothes on. He goes through the alleys and I follow him, watch him go into the hostelers and buy a horse. Couple of minutes later, he rides out; reckon this town's seen the last of him."

Mike said, "You mean Canaris has run away?"

Lafe nodded. "That's just what I mean."

"But...but why? Hey—what do you mean, you gave Tolliver my answer? I was on my way to meet you and tell you..."

Lafe Rubens looked surprised, and closed a knowing eyelid at Dolly. "What, you don't remember?"

"Remember what?"

"What you told Dolly, of course! She passed it on to me; pardner, that was the dangdest clever trick I ever heard of. You stuck by the rules; you showed you were willing to meet him, and he got scared and ran away. You beat Jim Canaris, and I guess you're the only man he's challenged who's ever lived to tell the story."

Mike shook his head, then groaned again. Dolly glanced at Lafe, who winked quickly. "Darling," she said, "don't you remember? You said you didn't think it was quite honorable, but you'd do it for me. I knew it would be all right."

"All right!" chortled Lafe. "It's better than that. They're drinking toasts to Mike all over town and saying what a shame the duel didn't come off and what a yellow bird that Canaris is. Of course, under the circumstances, I guess they're grinning when they say he's a coward; can't blame him for running out, really, when he had no chance at all."

Mike closed his eyes in an effort at concentration. "Oh...I...oh yes, I had thought of that. I figured if I picked terms by which both of us were sure to be killed, he'd back down. Besides, it wouldn't suit his vanity to be killed that way. ...I remember, now, Dolly; I told you at supper I was going to pick sawed-off shotguns at five paces."

"Huh?" said Lafe. "Wasn't nothing of the kind. You hit his vanity all right, but you picked something he'd be at a plumb disadvantage at while you could make out. And the place you picked to fight in—that's what has the town slapping its sides."

"Place? Why...I picked down by the corral, didn't I?"

Lafe Rubens shook his head. "Son, that knock on the head just ruined your recollections." He clucked his tongue. "Guess I'll have to repeat for you the message I took to Tolliver." He cleared his throat. "I went straight up to him, bowed fancy like, and said, 'My principal will meet yours tomorrow noon in the middle of the river; the weapons will be sledge hammers.' "

"Sledge hammers...middle of the river..." gasped Mike. "Why it's nearly six feet deep there."

Lafe nodded. "Yup, just about up to your chin, Mike—and a good six inches over Canaris' head. That was real cute thinking, fellow. ...Well, I'll be moseyin' along."

Dolly went to the door with him. As she opened it the sheriff came along. "Howdy; Lafe, howdy Miss Harmon; how's the patient?"

"Much better," she said, smiling.

"Yeah," muttered Lafe. "Danged lucky that iron pot was loose on its nail. But you know, when I came in and found you bending over Mike, I'd have sworn that he'd been hit with the skillet you were holding in your hand."

★

GHOST TOWN SUE

How easily Vallie persuaded people to do what he wanted them to do. He might even find a way to save the Rocking Chair ranch.

Novelette

by Mollie Medcraft

SUE BARCLAY saw the man breathe deeply from sheer delight when he reined his bay gelding to a stop to allow first impressions of the place to soak into his consciousness. Looking through his eyes, she noted the shacks made of packing boxes, many tents and a few dobe huts sprawled there on the Continental Divide that was Oregon Pass. The town was like an ugly wart on the sun baked plateau. Except for one big building, the place seemed likely to evaporate.

But it wasn't the town, she knew, that fired his imagination and fed his soul. It was the immensity of the setting for the brawling town of ten thousand persons. The flat, barren country marched endlessly away, miles and miles of scrubby, dark sagebrush, broken only by the shadowy Carpenter Buttes to the south, and the purple, hazy Wind River Mountains to the north.

She watched him twist in his saddle to look back upon the broken valleys and gently rolling hills with some trees through which he had come.

And she saw him survey the plateau, which was treeless except for the sinuous line of Sweetwater River. She saw him studying the numerous diggings.

She knew when he reluctantly tore his eyes away from the open country and directed them toward the big, rambling, frame building that bore the sign *Treasure Mine*. This was her father's mine, and it had been losing ore. The structure housed a stamping mill, for the gold came in hard rock which had to be broken in bits and then

roasted, or treated chemically, to extract the gold. Skirting the big piles of tailings, he rode around the building.

She was sure then that he was Vallie Bond.

Conestogas were moving out with what were plainly loads of household furnishings and whole families aboard. Other wagons were being loaded. In some places, tents stood empty, their flaps undrawn.

Sue spoke a quiet word, and her mare broke into a slow trot and soon was threading her way through the formless town. A few minutes later she was riding down Main Street, which was hidden in the deep, little valley along the meandering course of Stone creek.

She passed the post office, three grocery stores, two blacksmith shops, a livery stable, and the *Gold Dollar* saloon. All the buildings were made of logs.

She reined the mare to a stop before the building that was labelled *Hotel*. Dismounting, she wrapped the reins around the hitching bar and went into the place.

She greeted him at the desk when he came into the Hotel an hour later. She noticed that he was carrying his rifle and that he needed a shave.

"Room?" she asked, seeming oddly out of place.

"Do you-all have one?" he drawled, glancing at her and then at the shabby office.

That drawling voice did something to her. Her heart began to do queer things, sending little prickles of fire through her veins. She stared at him and what she saw was good to look at—a tall buckskin clad man with narrow hips and broad shoulders over which the muscles rippled easily. He had come into the room with a tread as smooth and easy as a panther's. There was something about him that made her know she could trust him. But his brown eyes troubled her a little. They were bleak although they had laughter wrinkles at the corners.

"Yes—plenty of room—er—ah—I mean—yes." And she turned the register for him to sign. "Baggage, Mr. Bond?" she asked.

He grinned. "Only my saddle bags, Miss."

"Oh! Well, follow me, please."

SHE LED him up a flight of stairs, wishing as she did so that she was dressed in something else besides old levis and a checkered shirt. She didn't know that her hair was escaping in blonde, curly tendrils from under the scarf she wore on her head. Nor did she realize that her tanned skin was extraordinarily clear.

She paused at the first door upstairs and said, "I'm sorry that the room isn't better than this, but I guess you won't be in it much."

"That's a fact, ma'am, I won't be."

He stepped past her into the bare little cubicle, immobile, as distant and aloof as the mountains.

She continued her frank inspection of him. "Have a long ride today?" she asked.

He nodded and then scowled. "What does it matter?" he asked harshly.

She shrugged. "I was only trying to be friendly."

"Friendship with women," he told her bluntly, "has brought me nothin' but grief. I want no more of it." His voice was bitter.

She caught her breath, and red crept into her face. She squared herself in the doorway and stood her ground, refusing to be misunderstood. "I'd rather be a friend than a foe. Circumstances have made it that way. And I'm afraid we're going to need to be friends. We need the law and order you represent. You need our help."

"Law and order," he said, keeping his voice expressionless, "are highly desirable, especially here in the West. But they don't have anything to do

with friendship between men and women."

She was puzzled. She opened her lips as if to answer him, thought better of it and said nothing.

A fire was suddenly kindled in his eyes. Before she realized what he was doing, he jammed his hat firmly on his head, strode over to her, gathered her in his arms and kissed her on the mouth—hard.

For a brief, crazy moment, her lips answered his, pressing firmly. Then, she tore herself away from him violently. Anger blazed in her, then turned to shame.

She had liked that kiss!

He dropped his hands and let her go. Apparently, the kiss had not been what he expected, either.

They looked at each other. Neither spoke. Each refused to admit fault for what had happened. It was no longer a battle of words betwen them. It was more a matter of wonder to each of them. She was a little dazed. His eyes had come alive.

"Someone will bring you hot water in the morning," Sue said, glancing at the chipped bowl and pitcher on the commode. "Meals are served in the dining room. Supper will be ready in half an hour."

"Thank you, ma'am." He tossed his Stetson on the bed. "Could I get some hot water now? I need a shave."

"Of course. I'll get it for you." She was coolly matter-of-fact.

"No. I'll come for it."

SUE WAS seated at a table in the dining room when he came in exactly on time.

"Won't you join me?" she asked pleasantly, as if she had entirely forgotten the scene in his room.

"Thank you, ma'am." She heard him suck in his breath sharply, and she was glad she had taken the scarf from her head and had exchanged her levis and shirt for a flowered challis.

"Mr. Bond," she asked slowly, "why don't you wear your badge?"

He stared at her. "It's in my shirt pocket. How do you-all know so much about me?"

"My father is the delegate to the House of Representatives from Wyoming territory. He also owns the *Treasure Mine*. He's the one who asked President Grant for help. He wired dad last week that he was sending you as his special deputy."

"Oh," Vallie said weakly, "but this —er—hotel. I mean, aren't you-all workin' here?"

"Only today. The clerk quit, but a new one's coming in on the stage tonight. Dad has a cattle ranch up on the Sweetwater, near the mountains. Mother and I live there, and dad does when he can. We call it the *Rocking Chair* ranch."

Vallie reddened, and then relaxed as a big bosomed woman brought in the food. He was hungry and ate with zest the roast beef and potatoes, brown gravy, salad, roasting ears, pie and coffee. "I wouldn't have believed it if you'd told me I'd have roastin' ears here," he drawled as he pushed back his plate. "I've been ridin' a couple days and haven't had much to eat. That was good. Mighty good."

"The corn and lettuce came from our ranch."

Taking a sack of tobacco from his shirt pocket, he slowly packed his pipe, thumbed a match into flame. When he had his pipe going, he said, "There was a mean lookin' hombre at the *Treasure Mine* when I came by."

"Probably Flint Markley, dad's foreman at the *Treasure*." She paused, toying with her fork, her food almost untouched. "Some one tried to kill dad last week. Everything has gone wrong since he closed the *Treasure*."

Vallie drew his brows together in a scowl. "Why did he close the mine? Run out of ore?"

She shook her head. "No. He ran out of money. The *Treasure* is the

mother lode here, and no one has found much gold anywhere else, but the best of the ore disappeared."

"Disappeared? You mean—"

"I mean simply that. It disappeared. Vanished into thin air."

"Could it have been hauled out?"

"Every wagon leaving Oregon Pass has been checked."

"Reckon I got my job cut out for me from the start. By the way, why are so many people leavin' Oregon Pass?"

"There isn't enough gold here to support them. The *Treasure* has the only ore that amounts to anything. Oregon Pass will be only a ghost town in another month."

Vallie ran his fingers through his curly brown hair. "How far is it to the *Rockin' Chair?*" he asked at last, knocking out his pipe.

"About twenty miles."

"Would your father be able to talk with me if I ride up there?"

The words pleased her. "I was hoping you'd say that. The truth is that dad sent me down here for you. But he told me not to tell you what to do. I'm awfully glad you're going to the *Rocking Chair*. Dad can explain more in five minutes than I could in an hour."

Valie nodded. "I guess you-all like the ranch?"

"I love it, and so does mother. Dad likes it, too, but the *Treasure* has been his chief interest."

THE DOOR to the street slammed, and a man who looked like a guerilla stood framed in the doorway to the dining room. He wasn't tall, and his hands reached almost to his knees. An ugly scar, running from his right eye to his chin gave his face a sinister twist, almost like a leer. A big man, he was bull necked and muscle bound. His shirt, open at the throat, showed a tangle of coarse, matted hair. Just now, he was staring at Sue with such a bold expression on his face that she dropped her eyes.

"Mr. Bond," she said, "this is Flint Markley, dad's mine foreman."

"Happy to meet you-all," said Vallie.

Flint nodded curtly without saying a word and then sat down and fell to on the food the buxom woman brought. There were double servings of everything.

Vallie stood up. "Well," he said, "I guess I'll be lopin' along. Need to wet my whistle. I'll be back after a while."

Sue wished he would stay until after Flint was gone, but she couldn't very well ask him to. She nodded, and then began to light the candles in the room. She didn't want to be alone with Flint in the dark.

He wolfed his food, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and leaned back in his chair. "I don't cotton to that son," he said. "Who is he?"

She shrugged. "Just a man. He's got a room here."

Flint grunted. "Well, you're my girl. And don't you forget it."

She flared. "I'm not your girl and never was."

He grinned broadly, showing broken, discolored fangs of teeth. "One of these days I'm goin' to teach you a lesson, girlie. But not tonight. I got to find out about this Bond. Think I may need to learn him a thing or two."

"Oh!" She tensed. "What are you going to do?"

He guffawed. "I thought you was stuck on this new hombre. Sure you don't know him?"

"I never met him until a couple of hours ago."

"Sly, ain't you? Well, it don't matter." He guffawed again and left.

Sue stayed at the desk after that until the new clerk arrived on the stage. He was a middle-aged, shabby little man who fitted very well into the dowdy little hotel. Sue saw that he had supper, and then she turned the desk over to him. He fussed around a little and then settled down to read a newspaper that he'd brought with him.

She had nothing to do now, and waiting was hard work. She tried to read, but she couldn't keep her mind on her book. After a little while she gave up the effort and just sat. She wondered where Vallie Bond was and why he didn't come back.

After a while Andy Burns came in. Andy was one of the cowhands who had ridden down from the *Rocking Chair* with Sue. She didn't like Andy. The pimply faced youth was shifty eyed; and she thought he was mean—real mean.

"Want something?" she asked.

"Naw," he said, skulking in one corner of the office. He made her uneasy. "That new hombre in town's a real he-man," he said. "He throwed Flint outa the *Gold Dollar*."

"Oh! They were fighting then? What about?"

"About you," he smirked.

Flustered, she turned back to her book.

AT TEN o'clock, Vallie came in. Sue wasn't sure, but she thought he hesitated to speak to her. She said, "See all of our town tonight?"

He came over to her. "Mills thinks we'd better ride up to the ranch tonight," he said. "And I'm goin' to trust his judgment. Will you-all be my guide?"

He kept his face turned away, and she wondered why. "Of course," she said.

"Good. Perhaps we'd better get a few hours sleep. We couldn't do much tonight, anyway."

"What about Ogden? Will he go with us?"

"No. He's goin' to stay here. Wants to keep an eye on Flint."

He started toward the stairs, and then when he saw that she was apparently going to remain where she was, he came back. "Do you-all have a room?" he asked.

Embarrassed, she looked away from him. "No," she said at last, "I—well, I didn't get one, and they're all full now."

"Oh! Well, you take mine. I'll stretch out on the sofa here."

She protested, but when she knew that he was determined, she gave in. As she was going up the stairs she saw Andy slink out the door.

2

SUE SLEPT soundly although she had not expected to be able to sleep a wink. When Vallie called her at two o'clock in the morning, she lay still a moment, wondering if she had dreamed the events of the day before.

Vallie's voice at the door, asking if she was awake, assured her that she had not been dreaming. Jumping out of bed, she dressed quickly, donning the levis and checkered shirt she'd been wearing when Vallie came into the Hotel.

Soon they were on their way—he on his bay gelding; she astride her black mare.

"Is this the only road to your ranch?" he asked as they rode.

"Yes. I wish it wasn't. Anyone could drygulch us if he was a mind to, but it's a risk we have to take."

A full moon lighted the range almost as if it were daytime. As they rode northward, the level plateau became more broken. Deep gullies scarred the country, and as they reached timber, small streams lent musical grace notes to a night that had become chilly. Shadowy strongholds from the mountains blocked their way. They rode around these bastions through scrubby pines and aspens.

At the foot of a slope dotted with junipers and greasewood, they passed a mining shaft with the usual big piles of tailings, the place looking so ghostly that Sue shivered. It appeared to be

deserted, just as the whole town of Oregon Pass soon would be abandoned.

"Someone's hopes are buried in this mine," Vallie mused. "I wonder who it belongs to."

"This is the *Susie* mine," she said. "It belongs to Flint Markley."

"Oh! This must be the mine the men in the *Gold Dollar* were talkin' about. It must be nice to have a mine named after you-all," he said lightly.

Her voice was hoarse. "It's an honor I'm afraid I don't appreciate."

"The men couldn't understand why Flint's tryin' his luck up here. They think he's crazy."

"Nobody understands Flint," Sue said, quaking a little. She understood him too well.

"How far are we from the *Rocking Chair?*"

"The *Susie* is the halfway point. We have about ten miles to go."

They rode slowly, for the most part at a walk, finding the going rougher after they left the *Susie*. They encountered a stretch of corduroy road. Vallie's gelding didn't like the logs. He snorted and would have plunged off to one side if Vallie's strong hand had not restrained him. Coyotes howled at them from the hills.

Ten minutes later they reached a place where the trail wound along the base of a steep, towering hill. Vallie, glancing up the slope suddenly caught the glint of moonlight on steel. Instantly he tightened his reins. "Stop!" he said in a low voice, at the same time leaning over to lay a hand on Sue's reins.

A huge boulder tore down the side of the hill, crushing bushes and trees that stood in its way. Striking the road with tremendous impact, it rolled over once; and then slithered down the lesser slope which lay at their left. If Vallie had not stopped the horses, they would have been at the exact spot where the boulder struck. They would certainly have been crushed.

Instinctively, he brought his rifle to his shoulder and fired at the spot where he had seen the gleaming steel. Two spurts of flame answered him.

Sue had time for only a glimpse, but the one brief look was enough. The gelding quivered, went down. Something seemed to strike Vallie a mighty blow, and he was knocked free of the horse; he fell heavily on his left shoulder.

Frightened by the whining bullets, Sue's mare took off like a shot, and the girl was almost unseated. The mare bounded along like a deer, and Sue had a little difficulty in calming her. They were far down the trail and had rounded a bend before she was at last under control.

IN A FEW minutes Sue came trotting back, gentling the mare as she rode, and she heard relief in Vallie's voice as she stopped beside him. "You-all all right?" he asked.

"Yes. What about you?" she asked, shuddering as she thought of what might have happened to him.

"My horse is dead. That second shot knocked me off the geldin', and I don't have even a scratch. My badge deflected the bullet." He took the symbol of his office from his pocket and showed it to her.

"We can ride double."

"No. I'm a big man. That would be too much for the mare. I'll walk."

"We'll take turns."

He shrugged. "There isn't time for argument. We ought to be gettin' out of sight. I'll take my gear off the geldin' and cache it here by the side of the road over there in the brush," he whispered. "Can you-all find it when we come back for it?"

"Yes. It's here by the old pine, biggest tree between the ranch and town—"

"Good." With swift hands he uncinched the saddle and dragged it from the dead horse, then removing the bridle, he carried them both to a clump of brush and deposited them behind

what seemed to be a rosebush. Not even taking time to remove the saddle bags or his bedroll, he hurried back to the trail and picked up his rifle. "Can you-all ride through the brush for a while?" he asked.

"Yes. There's a path."

"Good. I'll be right behind you."

She angled away from the trail into an old cattle path, and soon they were under a protective cover of timber. Vallie walked behind her with steps as light and noiseless as a cat's.

Riding ahead as Vallie had told her to do, Sue felt the cold wind of fear blow through her. Those two shots in the night were both aimed at Vallie, she felt sure. Whoever fired them was an expert marksman, and the bright moonlight had aided him.

Although Vallie had come into her life only a few hours earlier, she experienced a depth of feeling that she had never before known. It was terrible to know that someone was trying to blot out the life that was so strong in this quiet man and that a killer might forever write an end to the purpose that lay behind those serious brown eyes. She knew that he loved life, and she found herself wondering if he would ever again have the feeling of saddle leather between his muscular thighs, or if he would know the comfort of dropping to sleep before a camp fire with the stars over his head for a ceiling, the shadowy hills his only walls.

What could she do to help him? She knew very little about the mine. It was only after her father had been shot and feared that he would die that he had told her about the ore robberies. Then, he had bruskly ordered her and Ogden Mills and Andy Burns to ride into Oregon Pass for the special deputy marshal. Grudgingly, he had told them as much as they needed to know.

It had been his idea to send the ranch ramrod with her. Ogden had been begging her to marry him, and in order to avoid another long talk with him, she had asked that someone else go. Her father insisted that Mills go with her, but in the end he permitted another man to go with them. Andy had been chosen because he was the least valuable of the cowhands.

AS SHE thought over the events of the last few months, Sue realized now that her father had been having money difficulties. Always accustomed to many of the luxuries of life, she had been startled in the spring when her mother told her there would be no new clothes. She didn't care, but she thought perhaps her mother did. But she had cared when her father had suddenly rounded up and sold half their cattle during the summer. He hadn't just cut the herd for Nellies, either. When she had asked him why he was selling off their half-fat cattle, he had stormed at her, giving no answer at all.

But she did not tell Vallie these things. It didn't seem quite fair to discuss her father with anyone outside of the family, especially when he was at the door of death.

A silent hour passed broken only by the creak of saddle leather, and then Sue said, "I'll have to go back to the trail. It's swampy up ahead."

"Ought to be safe enough now."

Both of them blinked when they came into the bright moonlight again. Already the grayness of the night was beginning to fade, and dawn had hung a purple curtain around the horzon. As they watched it, it slowly turned to shades of old rose. "Looks as if the sun would soon be comin' up," Vallie said, breathing deeply.

Sue dismounted to walk beside him. "Want to stretch a bit," she explained. "It's open country now until we get within a mile of home. This is our range." She took two steps to his one, and now she had to stop for breath. "I guess you know as well as I do that it was Flint Markley that shot at you. And he started that boulder, too."

"How do you-all know that?" he demanded.

"No one else would try to pot you. Besides, he tried to kill dad last Sunday."

"Hadn't you-all better tell me what happened?"

"Someone shot dad through the living room window last Sunday evening. The shot tore through his shoulder. It's pretty bad."

"Oh! What makes you-all think it was Markley?"

"Next morning we found a jackknife with the initials F. M. carved in the handle."

"Had a doctor for your dad?" Vallie asked.

"No. There isn't one this side of Denver. Dad said there wasn't money enough to send there for one."

"You-all don't tell me much."

"You'd better hear it from dad. We'll soon be home now."

She mounted again, and they continued on the way. After a while, she asked him if he had a family, and he told her about his mother and sister. "They're bitter about the outcome of the war," he said.

"You should bring them West," Sue said. "They'd soon forget the past. This country does things to a person."

Then, as if compelled to do so, he talked about Carol, the selfish, passionate girl he had married when the South had seemed certain to win the war. That was when he was with Stonewall Jackson, and they called him a rifleman and scout.

"Then the war ended," he said tonelessly, "and I couldn't get work. Carol had always had everything she wanted, and when I couldn't buy her pretty clothes and fine horses, she took her own way of gettin' them."

He hesitated a minute and then went on in that same, flat tone. "I left home and finally found work in a saw mill in Atlanta. I wanted Carol to go with me, but she wouldn't, so I went without her. I saved my money for six months and then went back to try to persuade her to come with me. She—" his voice became harsh— "had turned our home into a saloon. She made more money in six months than I could hope to make in five years."

"How—awful!" Sue breathed. Involuntarily, she reached out her hand to comfort him. Then, she drew it back. She knew now why he had been so hostile toward her at first. In his hurt, he thought all women were like Carol. He regarded them as natural enemies. Sue knew that a single intimate gesture on her part might destroy the honest regard for her that she thought was building up in him.

"I got my divorce six months ago," he said as if he wanted her to know.

3

SHORTLY before sunrise, they came out of the timber; and there, spread out below them along the low banks of the Sweetwater, were the buildings of the *Rocking Chair* ranch. Sue stopped the mare and gazed as if the sight was good for sore eyes. The big, log house with its rustic veranda was shaded by pines and aspens. Behind the house were two big barns and cattle pens besides four smaller buildings. Wood smoke was curling from a chimney of the big house as well as from one of the small buildings. The moon floated in the west, big as a balloon.

Instinctively, he took his hat off. And with that gesture the West lost as fine a law officer as ever wore a badge. He turned to Sue. "It's lovely, ma'am," he said, his face alight.

Sue started as he faced her. "Your cheek!" she said in a shocked tone. "One of those shots struck you after all!"

"I—I—" He stammered, stopped,

and started over. "I had a fight with Flint in the *Gold Dollar*. He had a ring on one of his fingers. He tore my face with it."

"We should have cleaned it up for you at the Hotel," she said, "but we'll do it now. Come."

They went down the hill together and across a log bridge over the river. Dismounting on the other side of the crossing, Sue gave her mare a vigorous slap on the rump, and the animal broke into a quick trot, ears alert as she sensed food ahead. Sue laughed and beckoned to Vallie.

They entered at the kitchen door, and the woman who was working at the kitchen range turned quickly. "Sue!" she exclaimed. "I didn't know you'd come back."

The meeting between the two women was warm. Sue, fresh and glowing from her ride through the night, took her mother, who looked worn out, into her arms. "How's dad?" she asked.

"About the same. He's asleep now."

"Did you get any sleep?"

"Not too much. What about you, Sue?"

"We've ridden most of the night. Mother, this is Mr. Bond."

"Howdy, ma'am," Vallie took the hand that was extended to him and looked down at an older edition of Sue. Mrs. Barclay seemed young, though, to have a grown daughter. She had the same blonde hair, curling in little tendrils about her face; the same blue eyes, the same pink unblemished complexion; even the same worry lines. Looking at her, he knew that in another twenty years, Sue would be just as her mother was now.

"You're hurt." Her tone was so like Sue's that he smiled.

"Just a scratch, ma'am."

"You fix him up, Sue. I'll get us some breakfast so we can eat before father wakes up."

"We'll patch you up in a second," Sue said, throwing off her leather jacket. Going to a chest she brought clean rags, a bottle of alcohol and a box of salve. Then she got a basin and hurried to the stove for water. Her tanned hands were steady as she cleaned the gash in his cheek with warm water. She uncorked the bottle of alcohol. "Better take your tongue from between your teeth," she said and dabbed it on

"Might as well lay a hot brandin' iron on my face," he grinned.

"I know. But this salve will help." She applied it gently, and Vallie sat so quietly that she asked, "Does it hurt now?"

He glanced up to see her looking at him with warm and sympathetic eyes. He shook his head. "It feels grand." Quickly he reached up and took the ministering hand. He squeezed it a little, and Sue felt the warm color come to her face.

SHE FELT a great uplift of spirit as she put her medicaments away and moved over to her mother, who looked wan and tired. Placing two silver dollars in her mother's palm, she closed her fingers over the silver. It was the money she'd earned keeping Hotel in Oregon Pass.

Mrs. Barclay wiped tears from her eyes, then called breakfast and the three of them sat down to ham and eggs, homemade bread and coffee. Both Vallie and Sue ate well, but Mrs. Barclay scarcely touched her food.

"I don't presume to tell you-all what to do, ma'am," Vallie said. "But you-all look plumb worn out. Why don't you let one of your cow hands help you?"

Mrs. Barclay flushed. "We only have two hands besides Ogden and Andy. They're out on the range."

"Oh!" Vallie looked embarrassed.

Just then a summons came from the bedroom.

"Tilly, who're you talking to out there?" It was an arrogant voice. It could only belong to a man who wanted to be obeyed without question. "Why don't you come in here and take

care of me? You know I don't like to be kept waiting."

Both Mrs. Barclay and Sue stiffened as if they were bracing themselves against the man in the other room. There was something of shame in the look that passed between them, shame that a man could be so demanding, yet so weak.

"Tilly, do you hear me? Come here at once."

Vallie released his breath slowly, settled back in his chair.

"Don't mind him," Mrs. Barclay said. "He's awfully sick." She got up from the table and went to the bedroom. Sue followed her. And Vallie followed Sue.

Jim Barclay's craggy Roman nose face was silhouetted against the headboard of his bed. His white hair waved majestically from his brow. His flowing moustache was well combed, and his goatee was pointed.

But now Barclay was a wreck, broken by the bullet he had caught in his shoulder, and the thought that maybe he was going to die. He still had the will to dominate, but the power to enforce his demands was fast flowing out of his body. It left him sounding like a bad boy about to have a temper tantrum.

But neither Sue nor Mrs. Barclay acted afraid of him. They just closed up inside like flowers that didn't get enough sunshine.

They began to dress his left shoulder, and Vallie, looking down, saw an angry, inflamed wound. It was bad, but he didn't think it was too bad. Only when he stepped closer did he see the red streaks running down Barclay's arm.

Of a sudden, he caught one of Sue's hands and one of Mrs. Barclay's. "Listen," he said, "I might as well earn my keep while I'm here. Let me take care of this."

Startled, Barclay turned his head. "Who the hell are you?" he demanded truculently.

"Vallie Bond."

"Well, you've been long enough getting here. Had to close down my mine. Reckon you fellows back in Washington don't care about that, though. Where's your badge?"

Silently, Vallie fished it out of his pocket and held it up. "This badge saved my life," he said, "but I reckon you-all don't want to hear about that."

"You're right, I don't. I got business of my own."

"And a nice, sweet disposition of your own, too." Vallie's voice was dry. He pinned the badge to his shirt. "I don't need to hide my identity any longer. Everybody seems to know who I am, anyway."

Barclay shrugged. "You bore me," he snapped. "The only thing I want to talk about with you is my stolen ore. Have any ideas?"

"THERE are other things to talk about first," Vallie snapped back. "Mrs. Barclay's plumb worn out. I want her to go to bed and get some rest. I'm goin' to take care of you-all for a few hours."

"But—but—my ore!"

"Your ore," Vallie said shortly, "can wait. In fact, I don't care if you ever get it back or not."

Barclay's steel-grey eyes were smouldering, but in a minute he shrugged. "Go on to bed and get some rest, Tilly," he said grudgingly. "You, too, Sue. Nobody cares whether I die or not."

"You-all won't die, Barclay, at least not for a while." Gently, Vallie took Mrs. Barclay's arm and steered her to the door. "Go on and go to bed, ma'am. I'll take care of your stubborn husband. Sue can help me."

"I—I am tired," Mrs. Barclay said faintly as they reached the hall. "I—" Abruptly, she collapsed in a dead faint.

Quickly, Vallie bent over her and picked her up. "Show me where to go," he said to Sue. "I don't think anything is very wrong with her. She's just

fainted. She's worried and overworked."

Sue led the way, fighting down the panic that threatened to choke her. "We'll take her upstairs," she said. "She'll be quieter there."

Vallie objected. "And you-all will be wantin' to look in on her every five minutes. We'd better put her to bed downstairs where you-all won't have to run your legs off."

"It doesn't matter about me," she said. But she felt a surge of happiness, —such as she had never known before. "We can put her in here." She stopped at a door at the foot of the stairs.

"Good." Vallie followed Sue into the room and placed Mrs. Barclay in the bed after Sue had turned the snowy sheet back. He knelt to remove her shoes while Sue went for a blanket.

Mrs. Barclay turned on her side with a little sigh. Her eyes fluttered open and then closed as the man took the younger woman by the shoulders and gently pushed her into the hall.

"Sue," Vallie said as he turned back into Barclay's room, "I want plenty of water and soft, clean rags. We'd better boil the water. And while it's heatin', you-all might get your dad some breakfast."

"I don't want any breakfast," Barclay said petulantly.

"You're goin' to get it, anyway. And you-all are goin' to eat," Vallie said, taking command of the situation.

Vallie went to the spring at Sue's direction and brought water, filling a wash boiler half full while she prepared the patient's breakfast. "Now," Vallie said, "stoke the fire and get it to burnin' good. Got any neighbors that you-all can go to for help?"

"The Ashleys live up the valley about three miles. They would come. But I don't like to go away and leave mother again."

"You-all can help your mother by getting help for her than by anything else I know. I'm afraid your dad won't be with us long unless we give him awfully good care. Besides, I'm goin' back to Oregon Pass this afternoon. You-all will have to go back part way with me to help me find my gear. It won't do to leave your mother all alone again. I'll take the food to your dad and I'll see to it that he eats."

She nodded without speaking. Then, she turned quickly and went out through the kitchen.

HOW EASILY Vallie persuaded people to do what he wanted them to do, Sue thought as she rode away from the ranch. Already, she was greatly cheered, and even if Vallie didn't recover the gold ore, she felt sure they'd find a way to keep the *Rocking Chair*.

The ride to the Ashleys was soon accomplished, and she came away with Mrs. Ashley's promise to come to the *Rocking Chair* in time to get dinner for them. She was sure that Jim would come and help, too, part of the time.

Vallie was sitting on the back step, waiting for her. He had his boots off. "Need to rest my dogs," he said cheerfully. "They're tired."

"It isn't any wonder after all the walking you did last night." She started past him.

He detained her. "Sit down and rest a bit," he patted the rock on which he was sitting. "Everyone's sleeping inside. Besides, I want to talk with you-all."

"Dad have any clues to offer?" she asked, as she took the seat he was offering.

"Well, no, not really, but he said some things you-all will be interested in. You know," he paused and adjusted his lanky frame to a more comfortable position, "I think maybe I savvy your dad. He's just a stubborn old coot that resents some things. I think he resents the close bond between you-all and your mother. Oh, I understand how things are," he said hastily when Sue frowned. "Nevertheless, that's how it is. He likes to be looked up to."

Sue thought that over. Finally, she said slowly, "Maybe mother and I have been selfish. Maybe we've left dad out of our plans."

"You two can do wonders for him if he stays in his present state of mind. He has agreed to divide the proceeds from the ore, if we recover it, between his minin' interests and the ranch."

Sue stared at him, scarcely believing her ears. "You mean that?"

"Honest Injun, cross my heart," he said solemnly. "And it will be enough to get the ranch to hummin' again. Your dad says there was fifty-one tons of ore that assayed a thousand dollars a ton. That's the ore that disappeared. He owes about fifteen thousand dollars in back wages and for machinery and equipment. If we can get the ore back, he proposes to pay his debts, and then divide the rest like I told you-all."

The expression on Sue's face was ludicrous. He laughed a little and he pinched her slyly. "He's also offered me a job as a cowhand on the *Rockin' Chair.*"

"Oh! Are you—going to take it?"

He sobered. "I don't know. I'll think about it later. Just now, I want to get back to the *Treasure Mine* as soon as I can."

4

THE SUN was hot on Sue's and Vallie's backs when they rode away from the *Rocking Chair* at about one o'clock. Sue was riding her black mare, and the man was astride Barclay's magnificient Morgan stallion. Mrs. Ashley's steak and pie and coffee had been good, and they had done full justice to the food. Even Mrs. Barclay, who said she was awake anyway, had joined them. After she had sensed that some sort of a miracle had happened to the household, she, too, had found that she was hungry—real hungry, in fact. Barclay had not eaten. He was still asleep.

A change had come over Sue. There was an inner radiance, a sparkle of laughter welling up from deep down in her, and a vivaciousness she hadn't had before. Her tall body had a warm seductive grace.

The day was fine, and both Vallie and Sue were young, and their cares fell away as they rode through the cheerful warmth of the early afternoon.

The Morgan was pussy backing with him, so Vallie gave him his head for a couple of miles. Easy to ride as a rocking chair, the stallion flew along, leaving Sue far behind. After the animal had exhausted his first burst of energy, Vallie reined him around and sent him loping back to meet her. "Sorry to run away from you-all, ma'am," he apologized, "but this horse needed exercise right bad."

The sun was striking fire in her eyes as she laughed up at him. "It's all right," she said. "You're a good horseman. I like to see you ride."

The flowers of late August were blooming profusely in the cool timber. They were strange to Vallie, and he asked Sue what they were. Columbine, she said, and wild asters, and many others farther back in the woods. The low creeping plant with the waxy leaves and red berries were kinnikinnick, the Indian's tobacco. The plant with the colored leaves was late blooming paintbrush.

Men had been cutting and stacking the native hay that grew along the smaller streams. This would be feed for the cattle during the winter. "Yours?" Vallie asked.

She nodded. "There isn't anyone else on the Sweetwater up here. But we haven't had enough men to stack as much as we'll need."

"I guess your dad has been too busy

with his political job and the *Treasure* to help much," he said.

"He's always too busy to work."

She held her hands, palms up, in a gesture of futility. "Dad has always been a plunger, a speculator. Always, we have lived in luxury, or else we've had nothing at all. Mother and I talked things over when we came to the *Rocking Chair,* and we decided to hang onto the ranch, no matter what happened."

"And you-all have worked like a man to keep it."

"I had to," she said simply. "Dad took no interest in the ranch. Ogden Mills is a good man, but he's not one to go ahead. It was up to me."

"Maybe you-all could use another hand," he said. "One that would work real hard."

Sue met his gaze. "I could use a half a dozen men like that, but I'm afraid there wouldn't be any pay for anybody."

"Maybe this man wouldn't want much pay."

Her eyes softened. Then she drew a curtain over her smile. "You don't think dad will get well, do you?" she asked abruptly.

Startled, he was about to protest, and then changed his mind. "I don't know, Sue," he said. "I honestly don't know."

She took the news quietly. "But you don't think he will."

"That's why I sent you-all for help. I didn't want your mother to be there alone in case anything happened."

"Thank heaven for mother. I don't know what I would have done during these years if it hadn't been for her."

He reached over and laid a hand over the one on the saddle horn. "Don't forget that you-all have got another friend now. He's the man I was talkin' about a while ago."

He felt the hand tremble under his. Then, she turned it over and pressed his softly. "Thank you, Vallie." And this time the smile broke through along with a tear or two.

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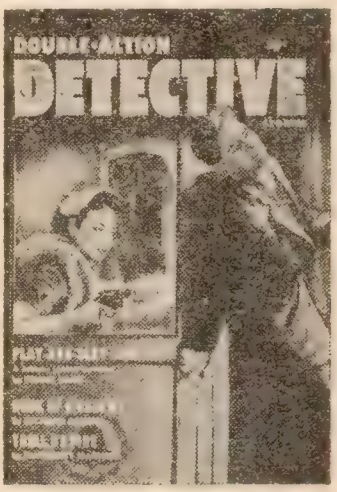

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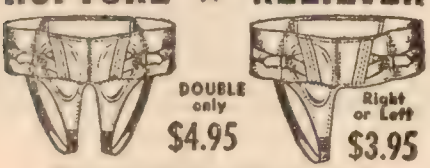

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THEY CROSSED the open plateau, their horses cantering, and soon came to the belt of timber that stretched as far as the *Susie*. Last night they had followed an old cattle trail that led them away from the road, and had not seen a beautiful little lake that lay like a jewel in the hills, its cool surface unruffled by even the slightest breeze.

Thousands of birds made their homes here: ducks, cranes, Canada geese, trumpeter swans and others that Vallie didn't recognize. A blue heron stood on one foot in the shallow water at the edge of the lake. Hell divers plunged under the surface and bobbed up again, light as corks. A big goose wrangled with a trumpeter swan and came off second best. The place was alive with action.

Sue's eyes were shining. "Do you see now why I love the West?"

He protested. "You-all never had to tell me that you-all love it. I've seen it in everything you-all do."

The gnawing uneasiness that had possessed Sue earlier, returned to her with renewed force as they neared the big sugar pine where Vallie had hidden his gear. But when he expressed apprehension for her safety, she tried to laugh his fears away. She was used to riding alone, she said. And besides with Ogden Mills and Andy Burns gone, there were no other cowhands to ride with her. She added soberly that he was the one who was in danger. Her life had not been threatened. She made a little game of finding his saddle, bridle and bed roll, pretending that she had forgotten where they were, pretending that she did not see the dead gelding.

But her reassurances did not ring true, and she felt more than a little uneasy as she watched him change the riding gear on the stallion. She wished that she didn't have the extra saddle with her. It would hinder her if she had to ride fast. She would have sug-

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gested caching it, but she was sure Vallie would not want her to do that.

She rode slowly, turning the events of the past day in her mind. It occurred to her that by this time tomorrow she might have the answers to a lot of questions—perhaps she would even have some idea as to what had become of the ore.

The first shot brought her out of her dreams. She stopped her horse, gentling the mare to keep her from panic. Reaching for her little hand gun, she cocked it and held it ready for action. She scanned the wooded slope but saw nothing. Two deer bounded around the bend in the road, scampering off to the right when they saw her. Another gun blast came from somewhere around the curve. The rapid hoof beats of a horse sounded a tattoo in the same direction. A magpie was jabbering, and she felt sure it was not at just another magpie.

The pounding hoof beats died away in the distance. Sue, every sense alert, remained where she was for the space of five minutes. Then, knowing that she would be a sitting duck if she continued on the road, she led the mare to the trees where she snubbed her to an aspen sapling.

Still carrying her pistol, she took to the brush, slipping through the brambles and low growing trees like a shadow. This was the kind of work that Sue understood, and her progress was noiseless. Walking with the effortless ease of a wildcat, she avoided dead twigs that might break and crackle. No animal could have made its way through the timber with less noise than she made.

But she hadn't gone far before she saw the Morgan tied to a tree. Vallie, too, had decided to reconnoiter on foot.

It wasn't far to the *Susie* diggings. She stopped a short distance from the *Susie's* shaft to size up the situation. That was when she saw the dead

[*Turn To Page* 90]

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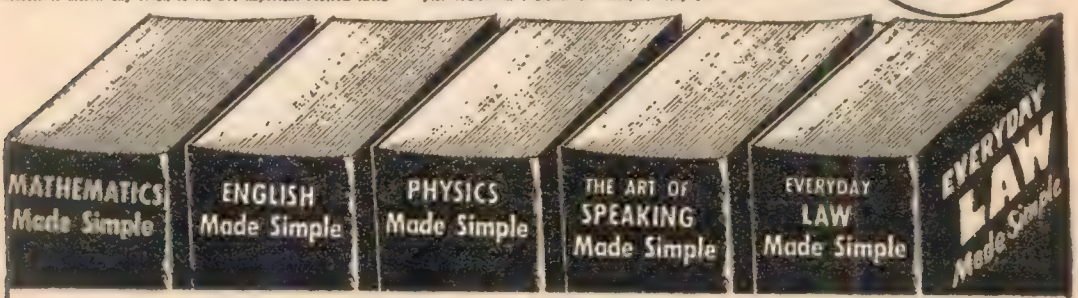

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horse and Ogden Mills. Involuntarily, she raised her hand to her throat which suddenly felt as if it were packed with cotton. He lay as he had fallen, and Sue saw that the ground under him was red with his blood, and she knew that he had been the victim of one of the shots she had heard. His horse was victim of the second shot.

Sue had seen death only a few times and never like this. She felt as if she would faint, and her ear drums hammered. However, even in her first violent reaction, she knew that her feeling was purely one of shock. She experienced no sharp feeling of grief. Even now, her thoughts were with Vallie and she wondered where he was.

Her eyes swept the ground around the *Susie* as she sought an answer to her question. Then, she saw Vallie's rifle behind the boulder where he had hidden it, and she immediately guessed that he was in the diggings.

Slipping noiselessly to the mouth of the pit, she heard the mumble of voices, and her blood ran cold. One of the voices belonged to Flint Markley.

Vallie had probably arrived at the *Susie* within seconds after the shooting of Ogden, had seen Markley and followed him down the shaft.

Sue knew that the man she loved was in danger—great danger! Gun in hand, she crouched breathlessly at the head of the shaft. Then, she went back for Vallie's rifle and laid it beside her. They wouldn't catch her unprepared.

5

SHE listened breathlessly to the conversation that went on in the pit. Part of it was inaudible, but she heard enough to know that Flint was planning to pull the ladder up, leaving

[*Turn To Page* 92]

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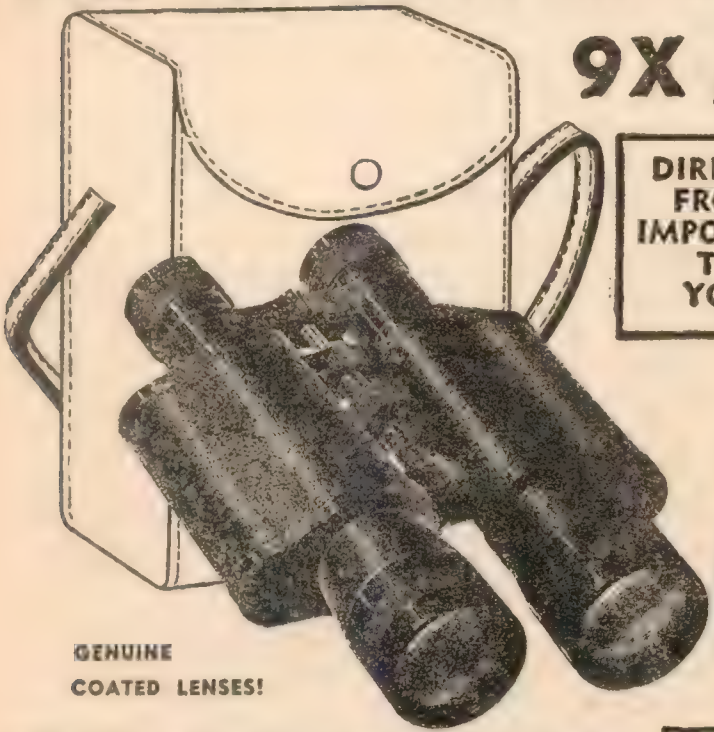

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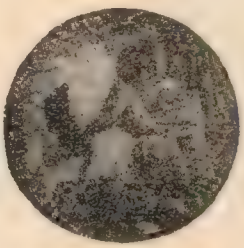

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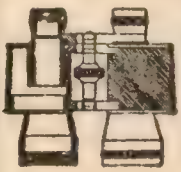

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Vallie in the mine.

She shuddered, knowing that Vallie was dealing with an inhuman beast.

"Barclay left the letter from the President on his desk at the *Treasure*," Flint was saying. "I read it. It was as simple as that. Your picture was in the letter."

"So you've known all along who I am. I was about to tell you-all, anyway."

"So you come all the way from Washington to arrest me! Think you can send me to jail, do you? Well, we'll see how you like a few days in your cell down here. Then, if you're still alive, maybe we can talk business. Savvy?"

"No," said Vallie, "I don't think I do."

"I'll divvy up on the ore if you'll come in with me."

"The answer is no."

"Supposin' I dump a barrel of acid on you. There's lots of it at the *Treasure*, you know."

"Well," said Vallie, reflectively, "if I've got to die, I guess it doesn't matter how."

"Well, you can't get away from me. Might as well make up your mind to that."

"I have. And since I am about to die, anyway, you-all might as well tell me a few things. Did you-all take a shot at me last night?"

"You aimed to slope into the *Rockin' Chair* and set the bag awhile, didn't you? I warned you to stay away from Sue Barclay, and I meant what I said. I aim to have her for myself."

"And what about Mills? Did you-all shoot him?"

"Sure. The son follered me up here. I had to do something with him."

"And what about Burns? Did you-all do him in, too?"

"Sure," Flint answered readily. "I promised the kid a share of the ore if he would help me. I guess he really thought I'd keep my promise. It was

him that messed up the job of killin' Barclay."

"But they found your knife in the yard."

"I loaned it to the kid. I wouldn't of missed that shot through the winder."

"One thing I haven't been able to figure out. How did you-all manage to get the ore up here from the *Treasure* without Barclay's knowin' about it?"

Flint chuckled. "Barclay often drove down from the ranch with his team and wagon. He'd picket the horses out on the grass around the *Treasure*. At night I'd hitch them to the wagon and bring a load of ore up here. I've made twelve trips."

Understanding of many things came to Sue with that little speech of Flint's: her father trying to whip weary horses into greater speed on those return trips from South Pass, Flint's digging for ore where there was no ore, his evasiveness when anyone asked him about the *Susie*, and other little things that hadn't meant anything to her before.

"You're smart, Markley. Very smart."

"You bet I'm smart."

"You-all don't really intend to leave me down here, do you?"

"What's to keep me from it?"

"Searchin' parties will be out lookin' for me. Barclay will see to that."

Flint's voice rasped. "They'd better stay away from here. I can sit in the brush and pick em off with my rifle all day long."

"They'll get you in the end, you-all know that."

"You won't," Markley spat the words. "That's sure."

"There are other men."

"And they'd better let me alone. It don't matter now how many I kill. You can only hang me once. Besides, you'd have to catch me first. And you'll never do that as long as I'm alive. I'd kill myself rather than be captured."

[*Turn Page*]

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VALLIE was silent for a minute. Then he said, "You'll never be able to come back here for this ore."

Flint began to swear. Finally he said, "You won't be able to talk yourself out of this marshal. You might as well save your breath."

"Looks like it," Vallie admitted.

Suddenly Markley laughed. "Better not do it," he advised. "I got my gun. I'd just as soon shoot you as not."

Do what, Sue wondered. She crept closer to the shaft and looked down. However she could make out nothing, except to see that the mine was not altogether dark. Some sort of light was burning.

"And now," said Flint, "I'll take your gun."

"I don't have one."

"Expect me to believe that? Turn around and put your hands up high."

There was a pause.

"Where's your gun?" Flint asked.

"If you mean my rifle, it's upstairs."

Flint snorted. "Your sixgun, bastard. Where is it?"

"Upstairs, too. In my saddlebags."

"Come again, you—!"

"Do you-all think I'd be in this fix if I had my pistol with me?"

Flint muttered something about Vallie taking him for a blockhead. Then: "Well, well, what do we have here?"

"Don't tell me you-all don't know?"

Flint laughed wickedly. "March!" he commanded. "Go down that tunnel ahead of you to that post. And no funny business." Then he gave another order, "Put your hands around that post—one on each side. No, not so fur apart. There, that's right."

The waiting was the hardest work Sue ever had to do.

Then, the thunder of an exploding shot all but burst her ear drums. And suddenly the strength flowed out of her body, leaving her weak as jelly. Val-

[*Turn To Page 96*]

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lie had been shot, she thought. Maybe he was dead.

She heard the sound of splintering lumber, but it seemed a year before she heard the rasp of shoes on the ladder. Her little gun seemed entirely inadequate. She snatched up Vallie's rifle. Waiting tensely, she wished if it was Flint, he would hurry before her courage oozed out of her. The hob nails of boots scraped on the rungs. Then, she heard labored breathing and she knew that her time for action had come

Poised, she waited until the man's Stetson was well above the ground, then she began to swing the heavy rifle with all her might. But just as she reached the top of her swing, she saw that the man was Vallie instead of Flint. With a startled exclamation, she tried to stop the blow. But it was too late to halt it altogether. However, she did manage to divert it, and the gunstock crashed against the top of the ladder.

Vallie was almost ready to crawl out of the pit when he heard someone say something in a choked voice that he failed to recognize. Then he felt the ladder tremble under him as the rifle stock splintered against it. He ducked hastily back into the shaft.

Sue crawled back to the pit shakily. She called, "Vallie, are you all right?"

He grinned up at her. "Sure, I'm all right. But what are you doing here? You-all pack a mighty wallop, Sue."

"I came back when I heard the shots. Just now, I thought you were Flint."

WHEN VALLIE climbed out of the shaft a moment later, Sue gasped in amazement for his hands were handcuffed, and he carried a small arsenal of weapons. "I rounded up all the guns I could find. Thought I might need them," he explained. "They're Flint's and Andy's guns."

"Is—is Flint dead?"

[*Turn To Page* 98]

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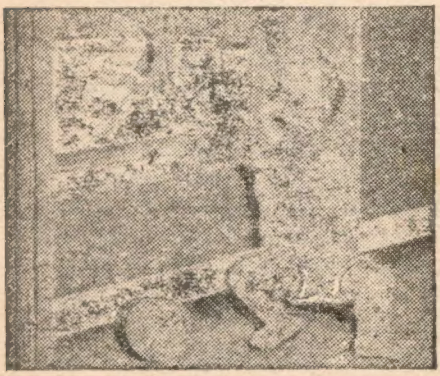

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Vallie nodded soberly. "Yes, I had to shoot him. I grabbed his gun when he turned away from me. Andy is down there, too. Flint killed him."

She shuddered.

"Did you-all hear what was said downstairs?"

"Most of it, I guess. You know, dad had every wagon searched that was leaving Oregon Pass by the main roads."

"And all the time the ore was comin' this way."

She nodded. "Dad never thought that it would be right under his nose, I guess." She paused and glanced down at the rifle that she still held in her hand. "I'm sorry about your gun."

"That's all right. I can have a new stock made."

"What can we do about those handcuffs?"

Embarrassed, he raised his hands and looked at the fetters. "Flint really took me, down there. Handcuffed me and I had to tear the plank from its moorins. The key is in my hip pocket. Can you-all fish it out and take these things off?"

She was still shaking. Her hand quivered as she searched his pocket for the key. Finding it, she inserted it in the lock, and in a moment he was free.

And then, she was in his arms. She seemed to belong there. His lips found hers, and she answered him gladly, completely.

Then, woman like, she burst into tears.

He soothed her. "It's all over now, sweetheart."

"I—I know." But it was some minutes before she could stem the flow of tears.

"Sue," he said, with a touch of jealousy in his voice, "Ogden Mills is dead. You-all liked him, didn't you?"

She nodded. "Poor Ogden!" She looked up at the man. "But I didn't love him."

"And I guess I never really loved Carol either. I knew when you-all gave your mother the money you'd earned in Oregon Pass, that I loved you-all. I always will."

His arms tightened about her. Then, he freed one arm and put his hand under her chin. Tipping her face to his, he bent down and kissed her lips again. It was like lighting fire.

"You might have been killed," Sue said as she returned his kiss.

He nodded. "And then we'd never have known that we love each other."

"I knew," she said.

He smiled, a trifle grimly. "Folks are goin' to say I married you-all for your money."

Sue looked at him through eyes still brimming with tears. "Darling, you've saved for us just about all the money there is in the family. Are you sure you really love me, Vallie? We've known each other only about a day, you know."

"I guess I couldn't love you-all any more if I'd known you all my life. I—I reckon, honey, that I'm through bein' a law officer. Your dad promised me a job on the ranch, and I aim to take it and settle down here. Does that suit you-all?"

Her eyes told him that it did.

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